

The Devil's Own

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Summary: When a company of ODS'Ts drop on New Mombasa to reinforce the ground operations against the Covenant, they are caught in an inter-atmospheric Slipspace jump. Where that jump leads will take those men from notoriety, to legend.

1. Flight Of The Wild Geese

**** The Devil's Own: Prologue to War****

Author's Note: I own only those characters which are original creations. Everything else, including the story line upon which these are based, is property of their respective corporations, namely Bioware and Microsoft.

Thanks are due to both** Minor Itch's** story "Through The Gates of Hell", which provided some inspiration with its humor and ideas, as well as the fan-made web series "Helljumper" which is one of the worst portrayals of the ODS'T and military life I've ever seen, never mind how much of the canon storyline behind the ODS'T it ignores outright. Platoon with Charlie Sheen was better.

The names of the men used are based upon real men, many of whom I served alongside in Afghanistan. Some were absolute disasters, others were consummate professionals and the epitome of what every man in arms should strive to be.

This is dedicated to those professionals. You will always be my brothers.

"Normal conversation"

>"Mental conversation"
_**"Radio conversation"

>*_ "Loudspeakers"

>*_ "Printed Words"*_

>*_

Now, let us begin...

* * *

><p>Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port
of Mars and at his heels,
>Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
Crouch for
employment.**
>~_Henry V_, William Shakespeare

Orbital Defense Platform Nassau
>Major Michael Hennessy's day was already bad. Earth was under
attack, ODPs Cairo and _Athens_ had been blown up, and now a
Covenant fleet was forcing its way planet side. Still, that was
something you could work with. Kill the bad guys, clean up the mess,
party hardy. What the good Major could not stomach, nay what
infuriated him beyond measure- his marines were not in the fight! It
was exactly the opposite of where any marine worthy of his emblems
wishes to be.

They'd been chasing Covvies for 2 years on the fringe when the
message came down from on high- "Company D, 1st Battalion, 105th
Regiment ODPST shall report to Port Nassau Orbital Defense Platform,
pursuant to garrison duties as the shipboard detachment". To the men
of Devil Company (for that was how they were known amongst each other
and by their enemies) it was an insult. They should be out hunting
Covvies, not babysitting a bunch of squids in a safe, boring place
like earth!

Now though, the war had come to them. From the view port, Hennessy
observed ships clashing, wreckage tumbling through the atmosphere,
brilliant red streaks tumbling across the sky. But two hours later,
still no word had come down. Looking over his shoulder, he surveyed
his men, clustered up in fire teams, sleeping or eating in their
armor. Veterans understand the need for both, and the men under his
command were graduates of the hardest school mankind could provide-
the modern battlefield.

All it took was a word and they'd be in the drop pods, flying towards
the Earth below at Mach Jesus, Hennessy in the vanguard. Every marine
there knew it. Sigma Epsilon, Tyr's World, Cumberland, Jethro's
Redoubt, nearly a hundred worlds and enough light years to last a
lifetime he'd lead them across. They followed Hennessy out of loyalty
earned in blood and sweat and tears and the reek of cordite on all
those planets.

"**_Delta-Six this is Nassau Actual, why aren't you in the CIC?_"**
The intercom squawked.
>Turning, Hennessy strode to the wall-mounted view screen and slapped
the response button with an armored fist, the ring of metal on metal
causing heads to turn in his direction.<p>

"This is Devil-Six, I'm awaiting deployment orders in the Morgue."

>"It's impossible for you to get briefed if you're five
decks away"** came the nasal reply.
>Hennessy paused, knowing what needed to happen next. And not liking
it one bit.
"On my way now" he snarled, cutting the connection
with the convenient expedient of a gauntleted fist straight through

the screen.

>Top Sergeant Torrez grimaced as Gunny Moore shook his head. "It's one of them days Rat" the Gunny declared, filing out of the Morgue with a grin. "Somebody's gonna die today" Antonio 'Rat' Torrez declared solemnly. "Better call the chaplain before we get there."<p>

* * *

><p>Five minutes into the briefing, Hennessy felt his blood pressure starting to climb rapidly. Commander Howard just wouldn't shut up and get to the point already! Every time he opened his damn mouth, it was like watching a public masturbation demonstration. Typically, Michael avoided such meeting by the simple expedient of a "full training schedule" but this, this circle jerk was just killing him. And Howard wasn't called Dick-less for nothing. It showed in his every demeanor and behavior.<p>

"First Sergeant Torrez" he murmured "please turn off that projector".

>The Brute Spiker which rested in a cross-draw holster on his left thigh cleared leather faster than the normal eye could track. A single Spiker round punched through one side of the projector system and out the other, cutting off the Power Point which Commander Dick-less had running. Needless to say, there was much shouting and screaming from the assembled officers.<p>

"And now that we've taken care of that problem, where are my marines needed?" Hennessy announced to the room.

"We have at least 5 other topics to discuss Major! How dare you interrupt me, and with a weapon which I know is unauthorized! Master-at-Arms!" Howard screeched.

>Click. In a single smooth motion, Michael Hennessy launched himself across the space between the two men, grabbed Howard by the throat and pinned him against the bulkhead.

"Right now there is a Covenant battle fleet in orbit over Earth! An assault carrier full of God knows what is trying to force a beachhead on the surface of the planet! And you asswipes want to talk about how we're not doing maintenance on our shovels!"

A junior officer made to move, only to hear the sound of Gunny Moore's gauntlet tapping on the barrel of his suppressed SMG.
>"Why don't you sit and relax, sir?"<p>

Something indecipherable burbled up from Howard's throat throat, fueling Hennessy's rage even further. His free hand flew up in a left cross that connected on Howard's temple, rendering him unconscious as he was unceremoniously dropped on the deck.

"I am taking my marines hunting. We are deploying to New Mombasa. We are going to kill any hinge heads that we find in the middle of that goat-fuck down there. And if any of you attempt to stop me, I will shoot you for cowardice in the face of the enemy."

>Captain Carney, the station CO started to speak. Hennessy skewered him with a look.
"You don't have the balls to make me do shit. Be silent."

Hennessy surveyed the room. Somehow, he knew he wouldn't be coming

back here. "_What do I need, what do I need?"_ He pondered, almost absently.

>"Jack, you listening?"
An AI sprang to life on the pedestal near him, dressed in the panoply of an 18th century Caribbean pirate.

>"It's Captain Jack, mate, and am I to presume you'd like some company on your trip to fabled New Mombasa?"
"That I am."

>"Then put me in your suit and let's go find some saucy wenches, savvy?"<p>

Jack disappeared into a data crystal, one which fit perfectly into the storage slot on Hennessy's helmet. Now he felt ready to go. For a moment his eyes closed, and all he could hear were the words of an ancient generation. _As thou didst help our fathers, help thou our host today._ Calm filled him. And as he marched out of the CIC, headed towards the certain death which awaited him, no man who watched Michael Hennessy could say he was unprepared.

* * *

><p>New Mombasa, Earth

>Those who lived through the experience would later recount their horror at watching as the Prophet of Regret opened a Slipspace portal above the city. The lives lost numbered in the millions. It was not until after the battle though, nay the end of the Human-Covenant War, that the Disappearance of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 105th regiment, would be associated with the opening of the Slipspace portal. The veil between dimensions having been rent asunder for a brief moment, it was near impossible to determine their final destination. All that remained was a single audio transmission burst by Staff Sergeant Brian Kramer: "Oh fist-fuck me in the ass!"<p>

There are three great mysteries in the history of the UNSC. The whereabouts of Master Chief John-117 and Admiral Preston Cole are two of them. The third is the location of Delta Company, 1st Battalion ODS. They are listed "Missing In Action" rather than KIA, on the rolls of the the Marine Corps. Whenever the battalion (or regiment for that matter) is formed and the missing company's report requested by their sergeant major, 1st Battalion gives the resounding cry "Feet first into hell!" It is a fitting epithet for the men we know as Helljumpers.

>-Esther Nakagawa, Time Magazine 2555<p>

* * *

><p>Horizon

>Jane Shepherd's day had started badly and gone straight to TARFU. The GARDIAN turrets weren't working, she had Collectors coming out of her ass, and no extra support in sight. At least I don't have batarians to deal with too, she mused wryly, dropping back into cover as rifle shots punched through the air where she had just been standing.

"_Shepherd this is Normandy"_ Joker's voice called out over the com link. Something about his voice put Shepherd off, and she reached up to touch the headset plugged into her ear.

>"Send it Normandy."
"Some sort of spatial distortion just opened up above the planet."

>"Describe it."
_"Almost four-zero clicks wide and nearly one-zero

tall. Hold it! I'd got something coming through!"_>"More Collectors?" Shepherd's blood ran cold at the thought of Collectors receiving reinforcements. They were barely able to hold the line with the small garrison on hand.
"_No_" Joker's voice faltered. "_It looks like escape pods of some kind._"

Suddenly a new voice filled the com lines. It was harsh and snarling. And human sounding? This day had just gotten much weirder for Shepherd.

>"This is Devil-Six to any UNSC units in the area, who can tell me what the hell is going on?"

>"Devil Six, this is Commander Shepherd Systems Alliance. I don't know who the UNSC is, but are you human?"
"_Damned right I am._"

>"In that case, if you're willing to help me rescue a bunch of human colonists from an alien attack, I'll do my best to help you sort things out afterwards."
"_Sounds fair. We'll adjust trajectory on your beacon and be dirt side real quick._"

>"We?"
"_Watch and learn._"

2. The Banshee wail of Hell

****Devil's Own Ch. 1****

All legal references may be found in the opening chapter 's
A/N/

"Listen up Devils, we're in unknown territory. Must've happened when that Covvie Jackass made his jump."

>Hennessy paused, allowing the news to sink in, then pressed forward. "Meach. You're going to miss that date you had scheduled with the lady-boy in Waikiki."
Laughter filled the comms as Meach tried vainly to protest. Hennessy knew his boys needed the levity.

>"Supposedly, there's somebody named Shepherd down there who can help us. First, we need to protect Human colonists being abducted by Aliens. Shepherd sent me pictures of what we're fighting. Memorize them so we don't have a friendly fire incident."
A pause, a breath, then. "Until I say otherwise, Cole Protocol is in effect. But do not forget, we are Marines! And if it is our lot to descend into Hell, how shall we do it?"

>The reply flattened him against the wall of the pod, even as the braking thrusters began to fire.
"_FEET FIRST INTO HELL!"_

Shepherd watched the multitude of red streaks descending, like meteors.

>"Joker, are you getting this on camera?"
"_Yeah, but I still don't believe it. Want to hear something else crazy?"_

>"Hit me with your best shot."
"_Not one trace of Eezo on those pods._"

>That made her stop in place. How the hell does somebody randomly appear in space, without any Eezo?

>"Guess we'll have to ask them about that."
"_Assuming you survive._"

>"You're always so full of hope."
"_I do aim to please boss lady._"

Checking her HUD, Shepherd realized that with the incoming support,

they had a chance to hold the GARDIAN tower till the tech monkeys finished their job.

>"We've got support inbound, says they'll be here in a little while. Throw up barricades as fast as you can and prepare to repel an assault in force. If the GARDIAN goes off-line there'll be nothing to stop the Collectors."<p>

"Incoming!" A colonist cried out.

>Shepherd whipped her head upward and around in time to see the flaming red streaks SLAM into the ground like ancient artillery shells.

>A door on the glowing red pod opened, allowing a tall, broad man in black armor to step out. He looked right, then left, surveying the damage.
"Looking for Shepherd" he growled.

>"That's me" Jane declared, standing up, still awestruck at the damage he'd caused. SHe was fairly certain he'd turned the soil near his pod into glass from the heat of the pod's skin.
"I'm Devil-Six. Where do you need us?"

"We've got to hold this tower. The Collectors know it. They can't break for orbit so long as its operable" Shepherd declared.

>"Well that simplifies the problem" Hennessy replied. The crowd behind him had grown to nearly 200 at a glance. He turned to face them.
"Weapons platoon on the tower. 1st platoon and 2nd platoons fall out by fire teams and dig in. 3rd platoon, establish supplementary positions at their six."

They fell into their work with a will, shovels flying through the dirt. Calls for "Stand clear!" echoed up and down the line, followed by a quick WHUMP as explosive charges cleared shallow fighting holes. Fill dirt formed a berm across the front, buttressed by whatever odd debris the troopers could grab. Platoon Sergeants quickly walked the line, followed by their respective commanders. Through it all, the man she knew as Devil-Six watched and waited, his rifle mag-locked to his back, staring impassively at the tableau laid out before him.

>"Your men know what they're doing" Shepherd said as she approached.
"That they do"

>"I never did catch your name."
"Hennessy."

>Up close he was even more imposing, a black garbed angel of death.
"It's too quiet around here. Pipers up!"

A sextet of troopers hustled towards them, with what Shepherd could swear were instrument cases on their backs and pistols in their hands.

>"You called sir?" A man with three chevrons and a pair of crossed rifles on his left paldron said, hands resting easily on the shotgun slung across his chest.
"Sergeant Tolliver, establish the guidon here, give us a cadence till its time."

>"With pleasure sir."<p>

The troopers began holstering their pistols in trade for their instruments, while the sergeant pulled an olive-green bundle off his back. Inside was a two-piece staff and furled banner. The poles screwed together, the banner unfurled, and Jane felt her skin grow cold with goosebumps. She knew that symbol. She'd seen it in a museum on Earth. A "D" in the corner indicated "Delta Company" and the "1/2/105th" on the opposite side indicated 1st Battalion, 2nd Regiment. But she'd never heard or read of a 105th Marine division. _And there hasn't been a Marine Corps since 2050. Who are these

guys?_

The color sergeant took his place at Hennessy's side and began to call cadence out loud. Jane watched, curious. Picks and shovels rose and fell with the beat.

Bring Sally up, Bring sally down

>Lift and squat gotta tear the ground
>Old Miss Lucy's dead and gone
>Left me hear to weep and moan
>So bring Sally up, bring Sally down
>Lift and squat gotta tear the ground!

He'd gone two times through those same lines before "Collectors inbound, range 3000 meters!" The weapons platoon commander hollered from high up on the tower.

"Sergeant Tolliver, let those bastards know whom they face today!" Hennessy ordered sharply.

The sergeant ceased to call cadence as the drummers began tapping out a beat. For a moment all she heard was the steady bass. Then, the trio of pipers made their presence felt with a wail. A howling banshee-son-of-Moloch-come-to-devour-your-children wail that set teeth on edge. And yet, it called out to her very soul, a primal, raging roar. From the trenches she heard the men begin to sing, bellowing out words with a fervor and glee she could very well appreciate.

"Axes flash, broadswords swing

>Shining armor's piercing ring!
>Horses run with a polished shield,
>Fight those bastards till they yield!
>Midnight mare and blood red roan
>Fight to keep this land your own.
>Sound the Horn and call the cry:
>HOW MANY OF THEM CAN WE MAKE DIE?"

Every man sang, even Hennessy. Their visors were open now, and she could see the fierce smiles on their faces. Hennessy's visage was terrible now, a thing of fury and fire.

"Follow orders as your told,

>Make their yellow blood run cold
>Fight until you die or drop,
>A force like our is hard to stop,
>Close your mind to stress and pain
>Fight till your no longer sane.
>Let not one damn cur pass by
>HOW MANY OF THEM CAN WE MAKE DIE?"

"Snipers may commence fire at will! All others wait for my command!" Hennessy pitched his voice to be heard above the din.

The cacophony of sounds reverberated off windows and walls, echoing out across the city. A family huddled in their home, praying for deliverance heard it, and knew their prayers had been answered.

>"Daddy" a little girl asked, eyes wide "is that what angels sound like?"
"Yes Chiquita, it is."

_Guard your women and children well
>Send these bastards back to Hell.
We'll teach them the ways of war
>And they won't come here anymore.
Use your shield and use your head,
>Fight till every one is dead.
Raise a flag up to the sky,
>HOW MANY OF THEM CAN WE MAKE DIE?

Rifles lent their voices to the cacophany, the _crack_ of M392 DMRs punctuated by a deep _BOOM_ from one of the company's many SRS-99s as they began taking down targets. Calm, steady, deliberate firing. A minute passed as Shepherd stood beside Hennessy, the center of a swirling vortex of inhuman energy.
>Even Grunt had noticed and he shot Shepherd a grin before he turned towards the horde of oncoming enemies. "It is a good day to die!" he growled over the comm.

"Range is 500 meters mate, and we've still got nearly 200 of the bastards left" Jack intoned in Hennessy's ear.
>"Nobody said getting home would be easy" Hennessy mused. The rifle came off his back in a smooth motion as he gave the next order. " Fix bayonets!"<p>

_Dawn has broke, the time has come
>Move your feet to a marching drum
We'll win the war and pay the toll,
>Fight as one in heart and soul
Midnight mare and blood red roan

>Fight to keep this land your own.
Sound the horn and call the cry,
>HOW MANY OF THEM CAN WE MAKE DIE?

In the long, wild minutes that followed, Shepherd, along with the Horizon colonists, learned something that the Covenant had known ever since a mustang major took his command on their first orbital assault against the Covenant. The same lesson a 21st-century Marine general had impressed upon his men on the eve of invasion. Sulla had coined the phrase in the days of the Roman legions, and while he would have recognized neither arms nor armor, he would have recognized the spirit of these men. No better friend, no worse enemy.

* * *

><p>Rifle and SMG fire sawed through the waves of collectors. To the untrained civilian, it would seem that the ODSTs were firing on automatic, but for a man like Garrus Vakarian, the difference was profound- they were performing what infantrymen everywhere called "talking guns". A single weapon system would open fire for a brief burst, then stop. The weapon next to it would then open up for an equal amount of time. Utilizing such a method allowed weapon barrels to stay cooler longer and reload as necessary. But this was normally used by machine guns, not individual rifles and SMGs. Nor so easily.<p>

Before he could comment on this to Shepherd, a Collector Assassin cleared a barricade and barreled towards the command group. He began swiveling towards it, bringing his own weapon to bear, but he knew he'd never make it in time.

Three orange spikes smashed into its cranial structure, even as the shooter- a man with 3 chevrons up, three rockers down and a diamond in the center on his left pauldron, ran towards the Assassin, bringing the massive bladed pistol up and around to slice the Assassin's right arm off. The back-slash cut off the other arm, as he kicked in a knee-joint, bring the pistol down for a final cut, cleaving its head open. No wasted movement, nothing grandiose. Simple, smooth, precise. Grunt looked as if he was about to keel over from shock.

>"Shepherd, I really want that gun!"
"We have to survive first Grunt."

>"If we do, I'm taking his gun."<p>

* * *

><p>The end, when it came, was sudden. Between dealing with Harbinger and all of the damned husks Shepherd hadn't noticed the Praetorian headed their way till it was practically on top of them. Fortunately for the ODSTs, they were dug in, unlike Shepherd's followers who'd only half-followed her advice. 3 went down due to its Particle Beams. Barriers winked out under the assault, whereupon it slammed down into the ground, taking 4 more colonists with it, before rising back up into the sky.<p>

Watching the Praetorian, Hennessy began to run options through his head.

>"Big John, you bring the hammer?"
"Aye aye sir."

>"Stand by to smash."
"Kill."

>Particle beams carved up the soil at his heels as he dove for cover behind a burning truck frame. Shepherd had beat him there and she was breathing hard, hands glowing with that strange warp energy she'd been throwing around.
"Having fun yet?" He quipped.

>"If this is your idea of fun, you must be the biggest masochist I've ever met."
"Wouldn't you like to find out?"

>Shepherd had no reply to that, so Hennessy stood and unloaded a full magazine into the praetorian. Third Platoon followed suit, throwing up a storm of fire. The shields winked out and it slammed into the ground, taking another colonist, then slowly rising once more.
"Big John! Smash!"

From up above came a primal roar and Jane watched, mouth agape as a massive, black armored figure jumped off the platform, headed towards the rising Collector Praetorian with what looked like some kind of gargantuan hammer grasped in an overhand strike. This was psychotic! The hammer descended. Connected. The Collector form gave out a screech even as it was pile driven into the ground with incredible force. The carapace bounced, then fell and refused to move. Striding towards it, Hennessy pulled what looked to Tali like a barbell off of his belt. With a snap hiss it activated, two long white omni-blades springing into existence. But no omni-blade could cut so cleanly as that, severing the nominal head with ease.

"Oh I have got to get my hands on that" she realized with a quiet moan of desire.

"Tali" Shepherd stated, in a strict tone of voice.

>"Shit!" The quarian could've sworn she hadn't said anything out loud.
"Before you go pestering our guests, please do remember we still don't know a damned thing about them."

>"But!" Shepherd held up a hand.
"I didn't say you couldn't talk,

just be careful."
>"Okay."<p>

With the matter settled for the moment, Shepherd turned back to surveying the scene. ODS'Ts were up and out of their trenches, moving from husk to husk, bayoneting or beheading the corpses. _Definitely experienced troops._ The man with the hammer was still in mid-air. At first, Shepherd thought him a biotic, till she realized he had no warp glow around his person. But a black rappel rope protruding from his back told her something else. This Hennessy thinks ahead. _Crafty bastard, I'll give him that._

A man standing near her chuckled. She turned to look him over. He'd taken out the Assassin earlier. His black plate was otherwise unremarkable, save for an intricately-drawn design on the left side of his cuirass She peered closer. It was a rodent wearing a sombrero, holding a liquor bottle in one paw and a gun in the other. "Can I help you ma'am?"

>"Just curious" she paused, uncertain of what to call him.
"First Sergeant Torrez, ma'am."

>"I suspect we have a lot to talk about First Sergeant."
"You have a gift for understatement ma'am."

Her com set crackled to life.

>"GARDIAN turrets online" Chief Williams reported.

>"Shepherd this is Joker, Lilith is giving off massive energy signatures. Think she's prepping to lift."

>"And that's what we call a timely ending. Let's hope it's enough" Shepherd said grumpily.
The turrets overhead began to fire, ripping chunks off the Collector starship as it rose into the sky on a pillar of fire, green lances stabbing deeper and deeper. But it wouldn't be enough. Then, a lucky shot punched into the Eezo core. For a moment, a new star was born in the sky. The shockwave rolled over them with a fury, tossing people left and right. Then it too passed.

>"Damn" Shepherd said without much enthusiasm as she stood.
"How many did we save?"

>It was Hennessy, rifle secured against his back armor plate once more. The visor plate was up now, and she could easily see the icy blue eyes behind them. His eyes were wrinkled at the corners, and his face lined with a burnt-in tan from alien suns. Almost handsome.
"Probably half the colony."

>"Better than losing all of them" he grunted.
"I suppose."

>Looking toward the first sergeant, he made a come hither motion with his head.
"Top, have the boys settle in for the next couple hours. Weapons, armor, chow. Redistribute ammo too. Don't know how long we'll go without resupply."

>"Aye sir."
Without a word to Shepherd, Hennessy walked towards the tower while the First Sergeant began bellowing for his platoon sergeants. Shepherd felt a flush of irritation. When was she going to get some answers?

* * *

><p>Two hours later, that talk still hadn't happened. The ODS'Ts had gathered up the Collector corpses into a pyre with assistance from the colonists. Off to another side, a second fire was blazing away. They'd taken the biggest remaining portion of the Praetorian's back

shell, placed it over a fire, and were now grilling meat on it! Helmets hung at their sides, weapons slung out of the way, but within easy reach, as the troopers laughed and drank from beer bottles they'd found somewhere, waiting for their food to finish cooking. Strange music played off a sound system somewhere, and Jane could only guess at how they acquired it all. Hennessy seemed deep in thought, drinking slowly from a bottle of what looked like scotch. Expensive scotch. Must have rummaged through the administrator's liquor cabinet she thought wryly. At least he can't complain about it. Poor bastard was inside Lilith when she exploded.

"Chow! Come and get it!" the redheaded trooper running the grill hollered. The men formed a line, and Shepherd decided now was as good a time as any to speak with Hennessy. Gathering her courage, she walked over to him.

"Care to join me Commander?"
>"I think I will." Accepting the proffered bottle, she swallowed a slug worth of whiskey then passed it back.
"So" he said, in a flat tone "just what year is it?"
>"2185" she replied curiously.
He shook his head and laughed, then took another swig.
>"So what year are you from?" she queried him.
"2552."
>"Well, that would change things" Shepherd said as she sat down hard on a chair.
"Yep. Near as I can tell, my boys and I are stuck in a freaking alternate dimension."
>"Oh. That kinda makes sense." She was barely holding together. This could be the biggest find in centuries! And she'd discovered it!
"Yeah. The only thing I haven't figured out yet is what my boys and I are going to do till we figure out a way to get home. Got any use for a company of well-trained, well-equipped, highly motivated UNSC Marines, Commander?"

A dozen thoughts ran through her mind. With this kind of support, she could take the fight to the Reapers, and everybody else that was trying to get in her way of discovering the truth. A glance at the funeral pyre told her what her answer ought to be. "Oh yes" she licked her lips "I could definitely use some help around here."

3. The Rising Storm

Devil's Own Ch. 2

Here it is ladies and gents, the latest installment of The Devil's Own. You'll also note that the Prologue and chapter 1 have been edited and lengthened slightly.

* * *

><p>"Major Michael Hennessy first gained prominence during the Theta Durano Campaign. Then a sergeant over a squad, he led his marines on a two-day march to assault the enemy-held fortress at Samson's Landing, while the UNSC SignalsObservation Outpost was under siege by the comedically titled "Weatherfront Liberation Army, which amassed nearly ten times the defenders' numbers. Having approached through the supposedly impassable jungle, he and his men broke into the open rear of the fortress, killing its defenders to the man. When Hennessy broadcast news of the fortress' capture to the WLA, it was seen as a severe blow to their morale and legitimacy,_

>During the 9 days that followed, Hennessy and his platoon repelled 13 assaults, numerous infiltration attempts, and a VBIED aimed at the gates. Their gallant defense was due in large measure to Hennessy's efforts. While the besieging forces had to live off the land, Hennessy used their supplies to keep his men fed, supplied, and as rested as possible. Said one marine "The Sergeant played music for us on the speakers around the place. Them Willas could hear it too. One song fer assault, another fer reveille, another fer chow. The songs that put us to sleep kept them up all night. And when they finally did get to sleep, we'd slip through their trenches with knives and help them stay that way."
_

>It was by this means that the pressure on the Naval outpost was relieved, and the technicians able to finish repairs long enough to get a signal out. _Relief came on the 10th day when the cruiser Phobos arrived in low orbit. For his bravery and gallant defense of Samson's Landing, Sergeant Hennessy would receive his first Navy Cross and a battlefield promotion to Staff Sergeant, along with his first written complaint. Filed by the surviving members of the WLA, it details his summary execution of their fellow rebels, as well as his conduct during the siege. When questioned by a reporter on live TV, he replied that "...limited reprisals were carried out in accordance with the Common Laws of War, after evidence was found of war crimes. Or would they like me to put the video we found on YouTube... The video of them torturing and raping UNSC personnel after receiving their surrender?"_

_In the years that followed, he would rise to prominence and infamy. Politically incorrect, militarily popular, Hennessy's rising star gathered similar men to his side. _After disappearing from the limelight for a time, Michael Hennessy reemerged during the Mar HispaÃ±ola Incident of 2540. Rebels had seized the Sector Governor's office and held several hundred hostages. The Planet's orbitals were safely secured by the marine garrison, but without reinforcements, they were locked in a stalemate._

All this changed when the destroyer Gil-Galad arrived in-system, carrying 2nd Platoon, Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion of ODST, led by a freshly minted Lieutenant Hennessy. Gil-Galad deployed the Lieutenant and his men planet side. During the hours that followed, Michael Hennessy earned the moniker that would remain his forever. By dawn's early light, the hostage takers found their families drawn up outside the walls of the Governor's Palace. Wives, brothers, sisters, children, even distant extended relatives, nearly 4,000 people all told. Tied or zip-cuffed to each other and seated on the ground, in the midst of the group was a naval-class missile warhead.

>Striding towards the gate, Michael Hennessy announced his intentions- "At a time when our whole species is faced with extinction, you choose to act above the law and assist our enemies. That is fine. I too can act above the law."

>"Hijo de puta! Kill them. Show us the monster you really are!" Miguel Rocaberti, self-proclaimed liberator of Mar HispaÃ±ola declared from the wall.

>"How am I monster? I didn't choose to involve other people in this mess. And what a surprise. SeÃ±or Rocaberti's family is safely off-planet. As are SeÃ±or Pigna's and Cristobal's families."

>"You... You Devil!" A voice other than Rocaberti's rang out from the wall.

>"Give me the heads of Rocaberti and his lieutenants in the next

3 minutes and I swear by the God you worship no harm shall come to your families. Or wait. And watch your bloodlines wiped out forever."
__

>Miguel Rocaberti's head flew through the air 27 seconds later, cleaved off at the neck by a machete. His lieutenants followed close behind. No further deaths were necessary and Mar Hispanola quickly returned to normal business. From that day on though, Michael Hennessy was known as "The Devil".

-Esther Nakagawa, Time Magazine, 2555

* * *

><p>Horizon

Shepherd and Hennessy spent much of the night drinking and conversing. They watched the sun fall out of sight, along with a good portion of the ODS'Ts. Hennessy's men were by no means plaster saints, and their defense of Horizon had garnered them instant popularity. Any money they might have would be useless tonight, and totally unnecessary. No hard dirt for a bed, nor helmets for pillows this night. They still slept with pistols and rifles within reach. Such is the way of veterans who have plied their trade so long. The movements and actions are products of an unforgiving school. No man won a war by dying for his country. He won by killing the bastard on the other side and making him die for his country.

Shepherd fell asleep on the ground beside the fire, but Michael stayed awake a while longer. He had much on his mind.

>"Captain Jack, you ready to go do some raiding and pillaging?"
The AI's face appeared on his HUD.

>"Aye mate, and where would you like me to be doing that at?"
"Scour this extranet they've got running. I want a breakdown on governments, known major black market players, as well as a tech breakdown compared relative to the UNSC, and industrial capacity."

>"Aye aye sir."
"Oh and send out a message at 1000 hours, company formation at 1230. No need for 15 minutes prior."

>"Letting the rum wear off a little are we?"
"They're going to need it."

With that detail attended to, Michael stoked the fire higher, throwing more logs on before wrapping a poncho around himself and Shepherd. Out of armor, she wasn't a bad looking woman. Definitely curvy in all the right places. Red hair and a very light dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Looks like that ought to grace the cover of a fashion magazine he thought absently as he settled into place alongside her. There had never been any steady women in his life. The life of a combat officer did not contribute to a successful marriage. Not that Michael lacked for female attention. He wore his short cropped black hair well, and in uniform cut a figure that would do Central Casting proud. But he'd never found a woman whom he could truly respect as an equal. Till now. What to do with such a woman though, that was the question. Best to sleep on it he decided, checking the pistol in his right hand, Ka-Bar in his left, one last time before he promptly fell asleep.

* * *

><p>"Company, atten-hut!" Gunny Moore barked in that stern drill

field voice his men knew so well.<p>

Rifles crashed as 4 platoons came to attention. The gunnery sergeant turned in an about-face, saluted the first sergeant, then stepped off to the left.

>"Report!"
"1st platoon, all marines present and intoxicated!"

>"2nd platoon, all marines present and still horny!"
"3rd platoon, Meach had a premature detonation!"

>"Weapons platoon, ready to kill things!"
"Post!"

>Officers replaced Platoon sergeants at the front of their respective platoons. Michael took the report from his first sergeant, looking across the men. His men.
"School circle on me, fall out!"

>When they'd settled into place, he took his Helmet off.
"Gents, we've got a problem, and a couple choices to make. As near as we can tell, we've landed in a different dimension where the year is 2184. The Covenant don't exist, but humanity still has alien problems. Right now Humanity is almost completely unprepared for the war headed their way."

>"Fortunately, I borrowed Nassau's AI before we left. Captain Jack, show time."
The holo projector at his feet sprang to life, Jack appearing in their midst with a flourish of his hat and a bow. "Morning gentlemen. We've got a lot of ground to cover, not a lot of time, and did anybody bring rum?"

As Jack explained the situation, new terms came to light. Biotics, Turians, Krogans, Geth, the anti-AI laws, Cerberus. Sovereign. All told, the conference took 3 hours. The first 2 were education, the third planning a war and all its attendant details. They had a year, maybe two, to go from dead broke and no ship, all the way to a fleet and the supports necessary to engage in combat against an enemy who did not scare, did not run, and did not care about losses.

>Michael could see wheels turning within minds, and thanked his lucky stars once again for the men he'd gathered into his company. Friends and a reputation, along with a written order from the CMC meant Hennessy had actively recruited and selected the men in company. They were veterans one and all, with a finer grasp of strategy and tactical abilities than most line marine officers. They're not parade ground with perfectly pressed uniforms and never-gets-dirty rifles, but a desperate war against a relentless enemy? Oh yes they'll be just perfect he thought with a grin

"Now, because we need to cover several problems at once, we're going to split up, as well as restructure teams" Michael declared. He'd spoken with the XO, Top, and Gunny about it beforehand. Individuals who showed particular aptitudes would be teamed together. Pointing to a spot on the deck, he rattled off a dozen names. When the troopers were assembled he faced them.

>"You are my R&D team. Task the first: Weapons systems, ships, everything we had in our timeline needs to be created here, and fast. As quickly as Captain Jack can make them, you'll receive Dumb AIs. Figure out what we can most rapidly produce and get it moving. Task the second: Integrating existing tech into ours. Find me uses for biotics. Lieutenant Carter is your OIC, Staff Sergeant Boughton is your SNCO."
The next group was going to be a little more entertaining. "Meach, Barron, Soper, Robbins. You are my supply guys. If it ain't nailed down, steal it. We're gonna take everything they've got in boneyards, junkyards and breakers. Coordinate with R&D."

>Whom do I put in charge though? He wondered. Then the answer hit

him. "Barron, consider yourself a Sergeant. Meach, you're a Corporal." Dear Lord they're gonna hate me.
>Before they could argue, or protest, he called up the next group "Sanchez, Hernandez, Gomez, Pleitez, you are my money tree. When R&D comes up with blue prints, you're gonna sell rights to manufacturers- make them pay for what they're getting. What we're going to create and build in the next year is the equivalent of giving guns and horses to Indians. Don't settle for anything less than gold."<p>

On he went, making the assignments till only a double handful were left. What to do with them though was a mystery. He slipped his helmet on and called Shepherd.
>"Can I help you Major?" Her tone indicated she was still a little miffed about waking up next to a stranger underneath a poncho.

>"Wherever you're headed next, you're going to need shooters, correct?"
"The more guns the merrier."
>"Perfect." He took the helmet off.
"I need my four most evil-minded and violent NCOs, over there" he pointed with a gesture.

>The four whom moved first were exactly whom he wanted. Bell, Smith, Jimenez, and LaForce.
>When they'd moved, he looked over the last few men. "Fall in where you think you'll fit best."
Some more minor shuffling, and now only the four remained.
>"You four are now my personal bodyguard.
"Staff Sergeant Kramer!"

>"Sir!"
"You are in command of my guard detail, Warrant Officer" _He's going to get me back for that, after all he's done to avoid a warrant or a commission_ "you report to myself and no one else."

>"Errrr!"
"Talk about putting all your psychopaths in one basket" the XO muttered.

Truthfully, Hennessy couldn't argue with him about that statement at all. So long as you kept Kramer occupied, he wouldn't do anything rash. Like make EFPs or IEDs or homemade mortars in the nearest machine shop. Kramer had a wild streak of the Gael in him, but in a fight he was steady as a rock and a good troop leader.

Gazing at the four Non-Commissioned Officers once more, Hennessy smiled coldly. They were all close friends, first in boot camp, then in the Fleet and ODS school, before they tricked somebody into letting them all serve together under Hennessy's command. Hennessy could guess what the incentive had been for the monitor- fine booze plus hot and cold running bimbos could do much to accomplish one's goals. These four certainly knew how to get their hands on that.

Tall and lanky, Simon Carlos Bell wore a long barreled sniper rifle across his back, with white feathers etched into the side of his helmet, one per kill. He was as cold as the mountains he grew up in. Nevada Smith, even taller and incredibly muscled, carried an M247 Medium Machine gun, plus 4 drums of ammo. His specialty though involved pranks, traps, and ambushes. Shorter than either, with a lopsided grin on his Latino face, Jimenez had personally disemboweled a Covenant Sword Master with the long obsidian-edged blades he wore across his back. Higueran-born and bred, he knew jungles and how to move through them near-instinctually. Equal in height to Jimenez, but

with broader shoulders and chest, LaForce had curly black hair, an incredible memory for feuds, and a strong belief in the Code Duello; such behavior had seen him leave lawless Prescott one step ahead of a noose for the killings he'd committed in semi-legal duels. He was Hennessy's pistolero, and the best gunsmith in the unit. The cutaway holsters he wore on either hip held weapons that were not simply lethal but elegant works of art.

>God have mercy on the bastards who get in their way, because they sure as hell won't. Not my Horsemen.

"Before we leave this room, I need everybody to understand that Captain Jack, along with any AIs we create, remains a secret. In this galaxy, they hate AIs, they'll kill the Captain, and us too."

>A murmured growl rose from the marines. Family looks after family. Nobody fucks with family.
"Now that we all know what's going on, let's get off this rock and get busy."

* * *

><p>The Citadel

"_Citadel Control this is SSV Normandy coming in on approach vector 0391, angle 12 degrees, 0 on the laterals._"

"We have you on our scopes Normandy. Docking established at platform 71. Beacon on station 8117.6" the traffic controller intoned.

"_8117.6 solid copy_."

>The green light turned to red on the controller's console as a supervisor approached. "Was that Normandy?"
"Yes sir."

>"Alert Councillor Udina that Normandy has arrived and is docking at platform 71."
"Aye sir."

* * *

><p>Author's Notes:

I am not a grunt, I am an 0811, though the real-life first sergeant whom is found within this story is an old school 0311. I deployed to Afghanistan with him, and a finer marine you could not ask for.

>The Halo technology will be making it's presence felt very soon, as will the Illusive Man. Do I expect howls of outrage from the ME fanboys who hate being told that their tech level is underpowered? Yes. Face the facts: your own canon is against you. Quit your whining though, because you have biotics. Don't fear, I'm going to find some very innovative uses for them.<p>

What's up next? Udina gets set up and Sparatus gets bitch-slapped.

4. Slanders and Truths

A/N: After 2 weeks, the newest chapter is up. Between college classes and a sick, pregnant wife, I'm busier than a one-legged man in an ass-kicking competition. I appreciate the reviews, they keep me moving forward and thinking on how to improve the story. Tell me what you want, tell me your experiences (from those whom have deployed),

and I'll do my best to add them in. Military life gives things color and flavor others will never know or understand.

I do need a Beta-Reader and if you'd like to do that, please let me know. I'm not asking for volunteers, any man whom has worn the cloth knows how much we hate when somebody asks for volunteers.

There will be much more Halo-tech soon enough. As well as more about the other teams. Their stories and deeds will play a major part in this tale.

As always, I own neither of these multi-billion dollar copyrights. If I did, I'd operate the biggest military bar in the world just outside of Dallas. This work is dedicated to the brothers whom I served alongside. Semper Fidelis

* * *

><p>Chapter 4<p>

The earth is full of anger,
>The seas are dark with wrath,
The Nations in their harness
>Go up against our path:
Ere yet we loose the legions -
>Ere yet we draw the blade,
Jehovah of the Thunders,
>Lord God of Battles, aid!
-Rudyard Kipling

Donnel Udina was not a man accustomed to waiting. As humanity's representative on the Citadel, he wielded considerable power. Others waited on him. For the last hour though, he'd been forced to stand outside the Normandy's hatch. Even his Council-level override code didn't work. Shepherd owed him damnit! What was taking the stupid bitch so long? Never mind that the Normandy was nearly 5 1/2 weeks overdue! He needed to hear her report before the rest of the Citadel Council, and remind her not to bring up any more of this Reaper nonsense. It was weakening him in the eyes of the Council. Donnel Udina hated appearing weak in front of anybody.

Without warning, the hatch cycled open. Before he could make a move towards it though, nearly a dozen men dressed in strange black armor stampeded out, nearly running him over.

>"Step back and keep your hands where I can see them!" One of the black-garbed men ordered.
"I am a Citadel Councilor!"

>The first thought that came to his mind, after he opened his eyes was where had the blasted krogan come from? The one that punched me in the face. Looking up, he saw the same soldier, holding his weapon at low ready. There was blood on the stock. _That must be my blood._ His tongue poked forward and found a wide gap where his four front teeth had been. Realization. _Oh shit! That must be my blood!_

>"Step back and keep your hands in sight" the soldier said coldly.
"How dare you assault me? I will see you in prison for this!"

>"Step back or I will kill you." That cold voice brooked no argument.
Who was it that said power came at the muzzle of a gun? The consummate politician couldn't remember, but he knew then that man was right. Names didn't matter, social standing didn't matter. _Fuck fuck fuckity fuck!_ Udina thought as the panic within him started to rise.

>Slowly, he stood up, moving several meters away from the vicious bastard, anger obvious on his patrician features. Who the fuck were

these men? Shepherd hired mercs somewhere along the way. Probably paying them on her knees too. Not like she could afford it any other way, Udina had seen to that.<p>

Boots were heard coming down the access ramp. Another man in black, broad and bristling with weapons Udina didn't know existed. The left pauldron bore a rectangle in red with a gold square at its center, denoting some sort of rank. He surveyed the scene as he walked down the ramp to its base. Shepherd appeared, followed by yet more men in black. Something seemed unusually off about her. So very serious looking.

"Shepherd, where the hell have you been?" Udina shouted. With his missing teeth and broken nose, it came out garbled.

>She locked eyes with him, her gaze hot with anger. Then she looked away.
"You work for me Shepherd!"

>She laughed. A throaty, husky laugh. "You pompous windbag. I work for the people of the Citadel Alliance."
"Bullshit! Fuck those stupid peasants. You work for me. And if you don't start giving me answers I'll send you back to the mud with the rest of them."

>She started to reply when the man beside her touched her wrist, silencing the comment. He must be her controller Udina realized with a start. _Cerberus hired mercs for her to use. I've got to remove them before she becomes a problem. Maybe I can buy them off of Cerberus. All they need is money._

"Color detail, fall out!"

>From cases on their backs those in kilts produced instruments- this got the attention of Udina's guards. What mercs roll around with instruments?
Meanwhile one of their number seemed to be fastening two poles together. He shook loose a gold-fringed red banner, taking his place just ahead of the drums and pipes.

>"At interval, fall in!" Instantly, those without an instrument jumped into two ranks.
"Ready! Cover!" Heads whipped rightward as bodies began making minuscule adjustments to align on the head of the man to his front.

>"Fix Bayonets." Donnel had been a tiny boy when he first saw a bayonet, in a museum on Earth. He couldn't remember them being so long and unnaturally bright. Beneath the harsh light of the dock, the gleaming metal blazed with a brilliance. It was both beautiful and terrifying at once. Who but barbarians would use such a thing?<p>

"Port! HARMS!" Near-automatically, rifles came up across chests, one hand on the stock, another on the barrel.

>"Right shoulder! HARMS!" Udina winced as he heard the weapons slam into shoulders. There was no way normal men could do that without hurting. But not one of those dark and silent figures even twitched.
"Right FACE!" Boot heels drove into the deck as they rotated 90 degrees, all eyes forward.

>"Sir, the guard and colors are set."
"Very well Warrant Officer. Conduct us to the Council Chambers."

>"Aye aye sir."
"Forward! HARCH!" As if puppets controlled by a singular string, the entire procession began moving down the walkway, drums pounding a tattoo beat that boots mimicked, shaking the deck plates. The eerie sounding pipes played their tune, carrying long and loud in the metal passageway. As they passed by, a Councilor wondered what game Shepherd was playing at.

><p>"I tell ya George, I do miss the old country."
"As do I Lance."

>George Lee and Lance Kilpatrick were fixtures at Kelly O'Neal's bar, the only place on the Citadel to serve (in their eyes) whiskey correctly. As young men they'd shipped out from Earth aboard a merchant vessel. Near the age when most men are grandfathers, they found themselves living the life of confirmed bachelors aboard the station, drinking whiskey and staring at holo-pics of a home far away.
"Wish for the life of me I could afford to go back."

>"You and me both."
In truth, both had more than enough money, having retired decently, but after nearly 40 years away, what was there for two old-spacers to do?

>"Be nice to hear theâ€|"
"Hush man!" Lance declared suddenly. His ears strained to hear something. Something he knew wasn't possible.

Stepping outside of the bar, drink in hand, Lance Kilpatrick felt his heart stirring within him. Coming down the promenade was a set of colors normally seen only in movies, old ones at that, multiple campaign ribbons gracing the spade-shaped pike head of the staff. Behind them were pipers wearing kilts in a tartan neither had ever laid eyes on. It was yellow, like the MacLeod's, with two red horizontal bars and two vertical black bars of the same width. Their helmets bore painted on hackles with the logo of crossed rifles beneath a flaming skull. Neither man could read the phrase below the hackle- but who needed to? They could tell at a glance: these were real soldiers. Not Blue Suns or some other bunch of hopped-up thugs with guns, but real, honest-to-Mary professionals, like the Wild Geese or Gallowglass lads straight out of stories both had learned at their grandfathers' knees. Watching, they could see the young boys marched alongside trying to stay in step, even as mothers pulled daughters inside houses.

Impressive though that was, it was the music which carried them away. Saints above! Who would have thought pipers could be found on the Citadel Station? Though they were limited in numbers, both men felt the music. Not just heard it. For a long second Lance Kilpatrick remembered the sun coming up across those green hills, the warmth of summer sun on his face in a hay field. To George came the memories of blonde and red-haired lasses with wide eyes and warm beds.

"I can see home again George" Lance said simply.

>"Aye lad, so can I" George replied earnestly.
"Why do we stay here?" Lance asked.

George had no verbal answer for that. He reached into a cargo pocket, hand reappearing a moment later, bearing a crumpled old hat-and-hackle that had seen better days. Rough calloused hands straightened the wrinkles in the fabric.

"There's a freighter ships out for Earth within four hours. If we hurry, we'll make boarding" he stated quite simply as Lance produced an identical Tam O'Shanter. It was worn, and stained with the oil and grease of so very many ships, but Lance could care less. He adjusted it to a jaunty angle, took one last look at Kelly O'Neal's Bar, then together, they began their last walk down the Citadel Promenade. For these two geese, the long winter had the come to a close.

><p>Jane Shepherd knew the pageantry was necessary but she didn't have to like it. Hennessy had coached her on it in the days leading up to their arrival. "Udina and the Council are used to having their neat little orderly world. Nothing disturbs it, and so long as they can hide behind their precious treaties and memos and security clearances, they're safe. From the moment you step foot on the Citadel you must be in control. Shock them, awe them, bend them to your will. And gather the support of the Citadel's people behind you."<p>

Only time would tell if he was right. But if the past weeks had been any indication, the Major (and the men he surrounded himself with) had experience in war that far surpassed most. Imperfect? Oh gods above yes. The Four Horsemen (as the Normandy's crew had come to call them) acted like nothing so much as a den of tigers. Impetuous, raucous, headstrong and aggressive were perfectly appropriate words for Hennessy's guardsmen. She'd watched the feed from the Normandy's external cameras as Udina got knocked on his hypocritical ass. If the blood was anything to go by, he'd lost at least a few teeth. A lap-warming house dog yapping at a tiger. She smiled tightly for a moment. Her tigers. Or rather, looking out of the corner of her eye at the man on her right, Hennessy's tigers.

He was a strange man. Handsome, gentlemanly at times, he knew culture, philosophy, art, and even science. The upper-class education was obvious from the beginning. But there was a violent nature about him, a ruthlessness more appropriate to a buccaneer or corsair than an English Lord.

And twisted in his thinking? Nobody could be so sinuous, so serpentine, so very beguiling. She could not guess his endgame, but she knew his men were loyal to him. These last weeks had taught her that much. Like Alexander of Macedonia, they were welded to him from bonds of blood and victory. They followed him because they firmly believed he could help them gain what every fighting man sought-victory and heaven.

Executor Pallin wasn't quite sure what to make of the formation headed his way. If the camera feed coming through his omni-tool was correct, the woman at the center of this little parade was one Commander Jane Shepherd. Whom also happened to be KIA. And where in the name of Palaven had she found these mercs? What the hell was going on around here? A cough from behind and he tore his eyes away from the camera feed to see the parade coming into view around the corner. He closed the app and assumed a position of attention, praying to whatever Gods existed that he would live to see tomorrow.

"Mark time, HARCH!" booted feet began a rapid stamp as the men adjusted themselves into perfectly drawn up ranks.
>"Detail! Halt!"
The musicians ceased to play. Silence filled the air.

>"Who are you and what are you doing on my station?"
"I am Commander Jane Shepherd, Spectre, making my report to the Council."

>Well there goes the neighborhood Pallin thought pessimistically.

>"Then enter and give your report, Council Spectre."<p>

Still, the Executor did not step aside, nor did any of the C-Sec officers behind him.

>"I cannot allow the mercenaries to enter. Much less with their weapons. That is the law and you know it."<p>

Jane had to give the turian his due, he was a man of honor. Stiff, yes. But never without need.

Hennesy spoke then, his voice heard quite clearly.

>[We are no gutter-scum to abandon our duty. Nor will we surrender our weapons. If you push us, our blood and yours shall mingle on these steps today.]

>In perfect, formal Turian. It took her omni-tool a moment to translate what he'd said, but when it did, Jane understood why Pallin was staring so very intently at them. Then he replied.<p>

[**Swear to your gods that you will bring no harm to the Councilors and I shall let you pass.**]

>[I swear by Jehovah, I will not harm the Councilors this day.]

>Pallin stepped aside then, motioning for his men to do the same. "Enter and give your report, Spectre Jane Shepherd. They are already gathered together."<p>

With a flourish the music struck up once more and they passed into the Council Hall. When the airlock fully closed behind them, one of Pallin's men let loose a breath. "Definitely did not want to deal with that bunch boss."

>"You and me both Eddie."
"Don't suppose any of you have seen the video yet?" A third voice in the platoon asked.

>All eyes turned upon him. "I was manning the cam booth earlier when the Normandy made dock. Udina tried throwing his weight around as usual."

>This brought a grimace. All of the C-Sec men had dealt with the human Councilor. There was no lost love between them.
"And what makes that so special?"

>"When Udina opened his mouth, one of those black armored bastards butt stroked him to the ground."
Now that was news. Skittish looks in every direction to ensure it was safe, then grins began to appear.

>"I had to magnify to be sure- knocked out four teeth and broke his nose."
Wide grins. Most of the platoon had their omni-tools out searching the database for a particular video in question.

>"Whatever you do, don't piss those fuckers off. You'll pay in blood."
Yes you will, Pallin thought much more cheerfully. _Yes you will._

In the confined space of the Council Chambers, the sound of a single set of pipes and three drums was enough to deafen. They marched into the center, where Jane would give her report, ignoring stares and protests alike.

The formation came to a halt, musicians re-slinging instruments in favor of their sidearms, before they too came to port-arms. Now it was Shepherd's turn. She stepped out of the formation, marching with a precision not required since her academy days.

"Spectre Jane Shepherd reporting to the Citadel Council as ordered."

>"You travel amongst interesting companions Commander" Tevos said smoothly. The Asari matriarch had a gift for diplomacy and rationality, due in no small part to her lengthy centuries of experience and life.
"Who allowed them in our presence with weapons?" The salarian councilor, Valern, demanded shrilly.
>"That councilor, is part of my report."<p>

Jane recounted all that had happened on Horizon, including the appearance of the ODS'Ts. She did not speak of their origins. That was Hennessy's business to decide. When she was finished, Sparatus (no surprise) was the first to speak.

>"You'll forgive me if I find this a little hard to believe."
"No."

>All eyes turned towards Hennessy.
"No? Who are you to tell me no, mercenary?"

>"You have seen all the evidence you need. What remains now is essentially a binary set solution- you will either make public this news and marshal all of civilization for war. Or you will dawdle and see them destroyed. There is no other option."<p>

"As for what I am" The helmet came off and the grim visage that met Sparatus' gaze was unflinching "I am a Marine fighting man, serving in the forces which guard my nation and protect our way life. You use the term mercenary out of ignorance because you wouldn't know real soldiers if they bit you on the ass.

>Sparatus bristled but Hennessy pressed onward.<p>

"War is coming. You cannot sue for peace. The enemy only wishes to exterminate you. Furthermore, you know nothing of myself or my men, yet you presume to judge us. Or did you pay no attention at all to the Commander's report?"

>His suggestion of their ignorance did nothing to lessen the feelings of anger in the room.
"My men and I come from the year 2550, in an alternate future where none of you exist. Humanity rose to the stars on its own for almost 600 years. We are professional soldiers, whom bear the colors and symbols of a nation that dwarfs Citadel Space. Your so-called Dreadnoughts are but cruisers compared to what humanity produces in my timeline. We fought a genocidal alien race to a standstill despite being nearly a hundred years behind them technologically speaking. Furthermore, we have heard with our own ears and seen with our own eyes these Collectors. If you are too cowardly to accept her words then hear mine and know the truth."

>Tapping a command out on his omni-tool, he began to playback the video and audio of their defense at Horizon. They heard Harbinger speak his threats aloud, of the future that awaited civilization. When it finished playing, Michael replaced his helmet and waited. Whomever spoke now, with so much evidence would determine the course of his actions. Unsurprisingly, it was Sparatus whom raised his voice. In fact, Michael had expected it.
"Impossible!" the Turian yelled, all semblance of patience forgotten. "You speak nothing but lies! This video is a human creation! A farce! Guards! Arrest this man!"

Before the guards could move though, the marines had their weapons up and aimed outboard. Telltale red dots appeared on torsos and foreheads. Sparatus gulped audibly. _Gods above, how do they move so fast?_ he wondered, knees shaking as he belatedly realized what he'd almost unleashed.

The salarian councilor spoke first. "I think you might have offended them Sparatus. They seem disinclined to acquiesce to your request." He chuckled at his own joke. "Still there are means and ways to determine the truth." Valern looked significantly towards his Asari counterpart.

"I agree" declared Matriarch Tevos. "Would you agree to let one of my aides bond with one of your soldiers, major?"

>He nodded his assent.
"Corporal Bell, front and center."

>"Sir."
He stood stock still as the aide approached him. "My name is Na'omi This is a very painless process. I am going to enter your mind, show me what you wish. I will know the truth when I see it."

>Bell, cold as ever, did not answer. He simply nodded his head.
"Embrace eternity!"

5. To Know The Man

****The Devil's Own Chapter 4****

A little note I forgot to add previously, for those whom couldn't figure it out- to have a premature detonation, by cannon-cocker or mortar maggot standards is a premature ejaculation during the course of copulation. Highly embarrassing, but amongst a crowd of ODSs, entirely normal to joke about. Those whom are Politically Correct will find fault in this. They will call it Sexual Harassment and demand we do hours of SAPR training. They may kiss my ass. The same PC people will suggest that we be plaster saints. Again, they may kiss my ass.

>Now the question was raised: Wouldn't it be weird to have so many ODSs all at once in one place? Did you forget every time in the games and the books where they deploy in company-sized strength? Furthermore, this is a war to the knife, and the knife to the hilt- you'd want every swinging Richard on deck and ready to slay bodies, especially men whom know their craft so very well.
It has also been suggested that my work sounds similar to Tom Kratman's work(s). I grew up reading John Ringo and David Drake in high school. Reading the Colonel's work came easily- because as an American fighting man, it just makes sense. He might be Army and I a Marine, but I still have a great deal of respect for him. You might dislike what he writes, or how he presents the material, but that does not change how right he is about our society, and how fighting men truly are.

>Nothing has changed since last time: I still own neither series.

To our fallen brothers and sisters I say this:

>Rest easy, you are gone from before our faces but never our thoughts, and your families are constantly in our prayers.<p>

* * *

><p>AN: These events take place prior to Shepherd's Arrival and Parade on The Citadel.

"A man who won't fuck can't fight!"

>"Forgiveness is easier to obtain than permission."
-Captain Scott Connors, _Yellow Eyes_

****Norden**

>

>"President Erikkson will see you now Mr. Pleitez" the lithe brunette secretary announced as she held the door open to usher him within the office.
The bear of a man within the office made him think of a Viking chieftain. The office decorated in animal furs, battle axes, daggers, and sundry other antique weapons. The man in question though, a brute of a man with whitish blond plaited hair, stood beside a massive pit on the ground feeding an equally large wolf cub of some kind.

>He turned and smiled. "So you must be the great Antonio Pleitez my agent on Skaarsgard keeps telling me about."
"I don't know about great, sir, but I imagine he's told you about me."

>"Sit down! Please, let us talk like civilized men."
Both men adjusted themselves in their seats, then leaned back.

>"About a week ago, I get a call from Alexander, very good friend of mine. Level headed fellow normally. Except now he's jumping and giddy. Tells me that he might've just found something that could revolutionize ship technology. Insists that if I don't meet with you, I'll regret it. And that I should offer you my first borne daughter. So I'm going to give you 3 minutes. Keep my interest and I'll let you have more time, deal?"
Pleitez did not reply at first. He stood, walking over to the longboat against the wall. "My employer is willing to offer you an engine design that does not rely on eezo for travel, nor will it need mass effect relays to cross the stars." He turned to face the businessman. "How does that sound to you?"

>"What does he want in return?"
"Make enough of these engines to outfit a navy. Above and beyond all the civilian models you'll make."

>Erikkson's eyes glittered at the thought of all the profit he stood to make. Even allowing for the loss due to cost, it would pale next to what the open market would bring him. The Turians would be begging for his engines.
"Oh and one other thing" Pleitez announced as he pointed at the model against the wall "my boss wants one of these. Built to these specifications." He laid a holo-cube on the table.

>Erikkson smiled as he looked over the information the cube contained. "This we can do my fine friend. This we can do."<p>

****Alpha 7060****

Noverium Yards was the first set of breakers that the properly named "Forty Thieves" had scheduled for a visit. Infiltrate, inspect hulls, mark the appropriate pieces for salvage, then stash them in someplace out of the way. Because the idiots in this dimension restricted themselves to only what the mass effect relays could reach, the salvagers were waiting on newly manufactured Slipspace engines to be delivered. These could get the hulls to Wolf 359. Comparing star charts showed the system as completely unknown, making it a perfect location for what the Old Man had planned.

For now thought, the marines did space walks from hull to hull, identifying the most likely candidates for their nefarious purposes.

>"So I've got a question" a marine announced over the hooks.
"Scarbro, you've always got a damned question" came the reply from over in second fire team.

>"Well I'm always thinking" Scarbro said.
"That stripper at Suzy's would beg to differ" Miller declared. "Ya know, the one you told to do a lap dance on your face right before you puked all over her back?"

>Laughter filled the air. Contrary to what Hollywood did in the movies, nobody space walks for 6 plus hours at a stretch without talking. These men were no exception. The easy banter was a product of years spent under the hammer, together.
"So like I was saying" Scarbro pressed on "who the hell is the Old Man gonna have run this navy we're building for him? Last time I checked, ain't none of us qualified to do more than pilot a dispatch boat."

>"Maybe he's got something up his sleeve" Moore suggested.
"When doesn't he have something up his sleeve?" Logan retorted. "He's like a Vegas magician, always pulling rabbits out of hats and shit."

On the command ship, a bulk freighter rechristened the Dale Doback (desperately in need of new everything), Warrant Officer Barron leaned back sipping from a massive mug to stay awake. He couldn't drink caffeine like the rest of the Thieves. Nearly shutting down your adrenal gland by way of caffeine overdose does that to a man. Instead he was relegated to bug juice. Today's color of choice: pink. Which was invariably better than blue or green, but not as good as orange. He sighed, sipped from the mug, then checked his sensors again. 1st squad was almost done, and as soon as he had them safely collected up inside the hull, it would be time for a well-earned nap. His free hand brushed across the bars on his collar and he wondered for the millionth time what he'd done to deserve such a fate. Warrant Officer. Damn.

"Sir?"

>It was Shiver, the commo marine manning their plot board.
"Yeah?"

>"Come take a look at this will y'all?"<p>

Something in his voice made Barron wonder what wrong. He swung around in the swivel seat, bug juice in hand as he rose and strode over to join the Dixie-bred corporal.

"I started picking up this signal about 3 or 4 minutes ago. Near as I can tell its coming from the gas giant. And that don't work cuz last time I checked, we ain't had anybody near that the whole time we done been here."

Oh damn. Barron tapped a mic on his collar. "All squads, get a head count, we may have a Flying Dutchman." In short order the reports came in. Compared against their numbers, everything matched. So where the fuck was this signal coming from? "3rd Herd, saddle up, meet me at the shuttle bay in 5. Meach has the conn."

>He finished off the bug juice with a sigh then started making his way belowdecks. Fuck you Murphy. Fuck you very much.

By the time Barron arrived, Soper already had The Herd prepped for EVA. Barron did a cursory inspection, as they loaded into the assault shuttle, then took his place in the cockpit.

>"Shiver got a signal off something coming from the gas giant. Supposedly it's a UNSC tag. But all of our dicks are accounted for. Which means something fishy is going on in this joint. We're gonna mosey on over, poke it, and see what happens."
"If it pokes back, can we kill it, sir?"

>"Don't see why not."<p>

As the gas giant filled the view screen, Barron put the shuttle in a safe orbit just at the edge of it's gravity well. From here they'd take sensor scans. "Shiver, how clear is that signal?"
>"Source is inside the upper atmosphere, punched out two drones to get triangulation right now. Can you lock yourself into an orbit on a heading of..." He paused then rattled off a string of numbers which Barron began typing into the shuttle controls. Slowly, the nose swung around as the maneuvering thrusters settled them into the desired position.
>_Sensors are still having trouble punching through the gas, what do we do_ Barron mused,_ hmmm..._
>"Soper, how many EVA frames do we have in the back?"
"Three."

>"I was afraid you'd say that. Pick two people besides yourself, they're going with me. No arguments."
"Roger that. Rimjob, Benny, you're up."
>The assigned marines began moving while Barron gave final instructions to his co-pilot.
"Reichert, take us into the magnetosphere on this heading."

The bulky EVA suits established a bread crumb trail of transponders linking the three man team back to the shuttle and thence to the _Dale Doback_. Every few hundred kilometers, another black box was kicked loose. Barron had watched too many bad sci-fi movies to not consider every stupid possible thing that could happen. Bad comms were a prelude to everything going straight down the toilet.

>"Sir, my scanners just went crazy. Whatever's down there, it's big. Call it 1500 meters long, at least 300 wide. Cruiser sized easily."
>"I don't see folks around here just letting a dreadnought equivalent go off to the breakers."
_"Didn't expect 'em to be scared shitless by AIs neither" _Rimjob jeered
>"No fucking kidding" Benny stated derogatorily.
>They rode on in silence for a moment.
"We'll start braking for we hit the cloud. It'll be slow going, but I'd rather get back to the Dale in one piece."

The cloud, a mixture of mercury, hydrogen and xenon was a thick reddish-silver. Barron could barely see his hands in front of face. Only the sensors on the frame could tell him he was still headed the right direction. Up ahead, they indicated, the clouds would be thinning out so his visibility could improve.
>The clouds changed to something white and fluffy. Look left, there's Rimjob. Look right there's Benny. Look forward, check the range. 200 meters. He flipped hand signs to both then began applying braking thrusters on his frame. _150, 100, 75, 70, 65, 60. Come on!_

All three men broke through the clouds at once. What they saw on the other side made jaws drop. _This can't be real_ Barron thought. _There's just no fucking way._ "Hey Soapy" he said, trying hard to keep his voice at a normal volume, in control.
>"I hear you."
>"Got any bananas in the shuttle?"
"I think Bonin brought some."

>"Good, cuz I want a big fucking banana."<p>

****Fortress of Solitude****

Staff Sergeant Richie Boughton wasn't called the White Rhino as a joke. 109 solid kilos, a hair under 2 meters, he was built like an old bull rhino on the Savannah and his personality lent to that moniker. Right now for example, he was refereeing a discussion between two of his senior NCOs over MACs and which tech should be used.

>"Rails need to be replaced" Brasley declared.
"Rails recharge faster. They fly faster, and the ammo uses less space" Huerta replied, equally heated.

>"If I hit you with a cinder block doing 45, it will hurt just as much as a baseball at 90!"
"I call bullshit."

>Yep, time to step in. "What if we mounted two MACs side by side, with that rotating carousel Phillips thought up?"
"Could put capacitors to hold a charge in each chamber of the carousel?" Huerta suggested

>"And eezo generators for each gun?" Brasley interjected.
All three heads turned to look at the idea that was taking shape in holographic form over the work bench as they spoke.

>"What do we call it?" the Staff Sergeant asked.
"Tombstone" Brasley said definitively.

>The others looked at him, eyebrows raised in question."
"I mean come on" Brasley persisted "Those are basically big ass six-guns."

>"And if we use coil guns they can be mounted on smaller platforms like those freighters the Forty Thieves are getting us."
"What about a missile ship?"

>"Uh-uh" Boughton said resignedly. "Weber and Helmut have that well in hand. Says its basically a Marathon-class with no MACs."
Both Sergeants whistled appreciatively.

>"That's a lot of missiless" Huerta said.
"Yeah. They thinks they can fit at least 4000 Archers into one of them. And fire 40-round salvos every ten seconds."

>"Change what Huerta said" Brasley said without heat. "That's a metric fuck ton of missiles."
"Pretty much" the staff sergeant said as he left the workshop, headed to see what other fires needed putting out.

>He disappeared down the hall, boots clanking against the steel decking. Brasley took this as a signla for a break, whereupon he opened the mini-fridge they shared to produce two cold frosted beers. Passing one to Huerta, Brasley reached for a lighter to pop the cap off. It flew into the air even as he took a long pull, enjoying the smell of fermented wheat.
"Where are we gonna get crews for all this though?" Huerta asked.

>"Could always hire hookers" Brasley proffered.
Glass clinked as the NCOs knocked their beers together.

>"You, my friend, are brilliant."<p>

****_SSV Normandy_, 2 Weeks Before Landing On The Citadel****

Ashley Williams, friend and accomplice of the great Jane Shepherd stood outside the cargo bay hatch, wondering why she couldn't get inside. The camera feeds were out and she'd come down to investigate, worried about infiltrators. _And now I'm locked out of the fucking bay. Damnit, I did not need this today._

>She'd pulled out her omni-tool, about to make a call when a voice spoke from behind her.
"Locked out?"

>"Yes. We need to call Shepherd right away."
A tan hand snaked over her arm, wrapping itself around the omni-tool before she went any further.

>"Hey!"
She turned to see LaForce, dressed in black with pistol

belts slung around his hips.

>"Instead of jumping to conclusions, Chief, why don't you ask yourself why the cameras are out?"
"You know they're out?"

>"Focus chief. Think about it. What came on the ship earlier today?"
"Sheep."

>"Uh-huh. What uses do they have, religiously?"
Wheels seemed to click for a moment, but she was still lost. LaForce could see this and shook his head.

>"Follow me, keep your mouth shut, and maybe you'll learn something."
One hand's fingers played across the keypad and the cargo bay hatch smoothly opened wide, the other hand wrapping gently around her's to escort her inside the room beside him. _Been a while since a man did this for me, could get used to it._ Her mind rebelled almost instinctively. _Down girl! He's an enlisted man and you're a warrant for crying out loud!_"_

Within, the lights blazed and upon a stack of crates done in a pyramid, stood Corporal Jimenez. He was stripped to the waist, wearing an animal fur of some kind. The head dress he wore probably came from the same animal, a leopard it looked like. His bare torso was covered in complex black tattoos. At the height of the pyramid, on a stone altar, was the one of the sheep they'd picked up. Blood leaked down across the stones and crates even as Jimenez' chanting picked up volume.

"Oh my God!" Williams whispered. "What's going on? What is he doing?"

>"Raymundo Jimenez is a High Priest of Kulkulan."
"The Mayan Deity?" Williams asked.

>LaForce nodded his head. "One and the only."
"But why practice it here, like this?"

>"You mean in secret?"
"Uh-huh."

>"Because a lot of people wouldn't understand. People are scared of what they don't understand. Not the ODST Division though."
"Why?"

>"He does his job and does it well. That's all that matters in the ODST."
"Ah." Comprehension dawned in her eyes.

>"And you can say a lot of things about Jimenez. He's sowed more seed than any farmer ever born. But if I had to pick a man to stand in the pit of hell with me, I'd take him over any Christians I know."
"You say that like you have something against Christians."

>Brown eyes met blue in the brightly lit bay. "Some of the biggest hypocrites I've ever met were Christians. They embarrass me."
She cocked her head. "Are you a Christian?"

>"Wouldn't you like to know?"
Abruptly, he escorted her out of the cargo bay, hatch whooshing shut behind them.

>"Anything else I can do for you ma'am?"
At that moment, Williams got her first real good look at the younger man. He was shorter than her by at least several centimeters, but the way he carried himself gave the appearance of a taller man. The black pants and trim blouse fit him well, rather like a glove, broad at the shoulders and tapering down to the solid waist. His hands and wrist were thick, obviously powerful. The black belts he wore had a polished, gorgeous sheen, the cutaway holsters revealing beautiful engravings on either grip._

>Damn but he smells good. I know that scent though, where is it from? And that handsome face, with a lion's mane of tightly curled black hair that was made to be played with. NO NO NO. DOWN DAMNIT! "No

Sergeant, carry on."

>He did not walk, but strode away, driving his heels into the deck with a purpose. He moved exactly like a gunfighter out of the old movies. She'd heard the chatter from the crew about the way they trained in the cargo bay. Bell, the White Ghost, whom appeared at random in places nobody expected, Smith who laughed and joked near-uncontrollably, Jimenez and his black blades. But nobody ever mentioned LaForce. Perhaps Tuchanka would give her a chance to watch him in action?<p>

* * *

><p>Cliffhanger. Feel free to hate me. I'm in college full-time, working 20 hours a week and nursing a sick pregnant wife. I'm amazed I even managed to finish writing this.<p>

6. Hell or Plunder

The Devil's Own Chapter 5

A/N: with the reviews I've decided to try and lengthen each submission so that you the fans will have more to read. 5306 words. Enjoy

I still own neither series.

Semper Fidelis my brothers.

* * *

><p>With the advent of the UNSC, it became necessary to create a Marine Corps capable of meeting it's needs. Various nations brought together their traditions, practices and doctrines; the culmination of this is a branch of service that is feared, admired, and respected. General Tomas Carrera was the first commandant, and a more able man could not have asked for. He was responsible for creating three amendments and several more bills, which when introduced into the UN Constitution, kept the Marine Corps from being "run by useless political hacks and mothers with no willingness to lay a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom."

43% was, and still is considered an acceptable dropout rate, 2% the acceptable casualty rate. Mentioning Ranger School brings a sudden fear over spouses and sweethearts alike. Since its inception, an average of 7 die per class. Women are held to the same standards as men. The UCMJ is draconically enforced amongst Marines, and a certain attitude of superiority is sensed in every man and woman who wears the uniform of a UN Marine.

_Politicians complained for centuries, but they could not find the political backing to overturn the Martial Amendments. Then came the Covenant, and suddenly it was all justified.

>-Esther Nakagawa Time Magazine

So remind me why we're doing this?" Jimenez asked over the Horsemen's channel as the Kodiak cleared Normandy's shuttle bay.

>"Because Grunt needs it. This is his Crucible" Smith replied.
That all the marines could appreciate.

>"Oh goody. So what does he have to do?"
_"The clan chief and

members'll give him a task to prove he's an adult"_ a thick voice answered.

>"Oorah sir" both marines chorused to Warrant Officer Kramer.
"More than likely, it'll be against a thresher maw. Big fuckers, nasty as shit" he continued.

>"Sounds lovely. Why ain't LaForce and Bell here?" Jimenez queried.
"They're recovering from that trip to get Jack remember?" Smith said patiently

>"Oh yeah, huh." Jimenez announced unhappily. "Knowing my luck, I'll get eaten by it and have to carve my way out."
"You boots ain't got shit to worry about except guarding the Old Man".

>All of them knew that gravelly voice. It belonged to the first sergeant who sat with his helmet off, munching on pumpkin seeds.
"The only person going with Grunt off to his challenge is me" He declared.

>"Sounds like gospel to me" Jimenez said solemnly. "It's a very bad thing to stand in the way of Gods."
"Keep watching he might shoot lightning bolts out of his ass" Nevada intoned.

>"Smith, stand up" the first Sergeant ordered. "You know what you look like?
"No first sergeant."

>"You look like a fucking tree. My fucking tree. Jimenez, koalify my fucking tree."<p>

Moving with a purpose, the young NCO wrapped himself around Smith's torso, head towards the ground, legs around Smith's neck.

"Smith, I like my fucking trees to dance. Drop it like it's hot."

>Turning to Garrus, Top Torrez opened his visor. "Kids these days. So disrespectful. Care for some pumpkin seeds?" He asked as he poured himself a handful and began to chew.
"I believe I will. Thank you" the big Turian said with a grin as he received a small handful of the white seeds.

>"Be careful, they're spicy. Shut up Jimenez, you two lovebirds sound like a 3-legged hog with emphysema trying to run the Death Valley marathon."<p>

"I must say, I find your attitudes about life and war very un-human like" Garrus declared casually.

>"Part of the problem stems from histories. Humanity here doesn't have the generations of war that we do. It encourages a certain mindset and behavior. Our history is steeped in war, but during the beginning of the 21st century, we tried revising our history."
The Turian cocked on eyebrow. "That is very strange, why would people do that?"

>"Smith, Jimenez, recover!" A few more seeds went into the first sergeant's mouth. "They were embarrassed by the truth. It made them unhappy."
"So they tried to hide their lineage." Garrus shook his head. "You humans are very strange creatures."

>"Sometimes we confuse even ourselves."<p>

"If all of you are finished with the fun, we're about to land" Shepherd's voice declared from the cockpit. She'd taken the Kodiak's controls for today's flight.

>"Right, time to get on with the show."<p>

Outside, the air was it's usual putrid self. On a nearby pad, the second Kodiak was setting down. Grunt, Patrick, and the color detail trooped down the ramp. No instruments this time. The major expected trouble, so Sgt. Tolliver and his marines were packing rifles rather

than pistols.

"So" Shockley said casually "anybody else got that feeling like we the only watermelon at my family barbecue?"

>"Who knows Shaka Zulu" Tolliver answered cheerfully. "If we're lucky, somebody'll start a fight and we'll get to stab some bitches with the guidon!"
"Major, your marines are exactly why I was scared to join the Corps."

>Hennessy smiled at the compliment. "And yet here you are. Keep up a little longer and we'll make a naval officer out of you yet." He turned to his men. "Warrant Officer Kramer! Conduct us to Urdnot Wrex's compound!"
"Aye aye sir!"

* * *

><p>Grunt was seated near Wrex, Torrez beside him in a place of honor, entirely befitting the krantt of Clan Urdnot's newest member. The thresher maw they'd taken down was the centerpiece of the feast, roasted to perfection and served up whole. It was, Hennessy thought, entirely hilarious. First that Gatalog Uvenka buffoon had tried to argue Grunt's right to the trial. Then Grunt had confirmed Torrez as his krantt and hadn't that just pissed off Uvenka to no end?<p>

The Thresher Maw went down hard, but it had gone down. The ancient Frst Sergeant was an old hand at instructing and reinforcing the art of war. Grunt's weeks of tutelage under the marine had been very well spent. Instead of fighting like a brawler, he had played it smart, methodical. He'd gone for the Thresher's eye stalks, severing those to blind it, then Krin grenades up its nose to keep it from following his scent, and flash bang grenades inside the ear cavity to rupture the drums, severing an artery that led to the brain. After that it was all over but the shouting.

Which Grunt liked because in the process he'd been slapped around quite a bit and been thoroughly banged up- at least one broken arm, possible a busted knee. Chakwas' estimate was a week to recovery, even with his constitution.

Still. Urdnot Grunt. It had a nice ring to it. He looked towards the head table where Wrex sat. The clan lord inclined his head in Hennessy's direction, to which Hennessy responded likewise.

"Look alive, we've got what looks like 130, maybe 133 pissed-off Krogans headed this way" Smith announced from his post on the roof.

>"Wrex, you have late comers to the party."
"That's impossible Jane, all of the tribal heads are here."

>Then whose coming down the road? Jane wondered.
"Gatalog Uvenka's in the crowd, shouting something."

>"What's he saying?" Hennessy demanded abruptly.
"Something about how Urdnot Wrex is a traitor to the race and conspiring with the salarrians."

Shepherd and Hennessy looked at each other. _Uh-oh._ This was not good at all.

Listening in to the comm chatter, Kramer made two calls. The first was a matter of judgement. Call LaForce and Bell or not? If he called them, diplomacy went straight out the window. They'd slaughter, maim and mutilate everything in their path. But that sixth-sense of his

was screaming right now. The one that said "do whatever it takes to win."

>"Horsemen this is Highlander. Anybody see the Boltons last night at the wedding?"<p>

Shots rang out in the night. A moment later, Nevada Smith's machine gun kicked into the rapid rate of fire. The Urdnot Civil War had begun.

* * *

><p>Joker and Miranda were following the events below raptly. Reports had started coming in, then abruptly cut off. Somebody down there set up a comm jammer. Now all they could do was watch on sat cam as Shepherd and the landing party came under fire from a massive mob of pissed off Krogans.<p>

An orbital strike was out of the question. And they didn't have nearly enough marines to try landing a strike force to relieve pressure on the besieged. Never mind that both Kodiaks were dirt-side already. This was definitely not a good day.

"So what do we do ma'am?" Joker asked tentatively.

>"There's nothing we can do Joker" the Cerberus operative replied angrily, mad at the whole situation.
"Bullshit!" Two voices chorused behind them.

Joker and Miranda turned to find two Horsemen behind them. Bell's bone white helmet was tucked under his arm, with large case of ammo at his feet. Beside him stood LaForce, festooned with magazines on X-crossed bandoliers like a border bandit.

"What the hell is that?" Lawson demanded, pointing a finger at the two meter-long rifle she'd just realized Bell was cradling in his arms.

>"Custom piece. Still haven't named it yet. And BFG is already taken."
"Why do you need such a big fucking gun?" Joker queried.

>Reaching into his thigh pouch, Bell pulled out a cartridge nearly the size of a beer bottle. The projectile itself had to be at least 15mm across.
"To shoot big fucking bullets. That's why."

>"You're going to take the Normandy into the atmosphere" LaForce interrupted.
"Why?" Joker demanded.

>"Because I'm an NCO and I outrank you."
"You're not in my chain of command."

Joker never saw the rifle muzzle that appeared between his eyes. Only that he was staring down it, and it wasn't wavering. At all.

"I get so sick of all you wing bitches being candy ass pussies. Much less questioning a fucking NCO who out-fucking-ranks you. If the next words out of your mouth are not aye-_muzzle thump_-aye-_muzzle thump_-Sergeant, so help me God I will shoot you and pilot this rust bucket myself."

>Joker audibly gulped. "Aye aye Sergeant."
"Wise choice. I want us in to come in at a heading of 5723, altitude 15,000 meters, speed of 400 knots" he ordered.

>The Normandy's nose swung around as Joker complied. Bell had a map going on his omni-display, selecting a point.
"Joker, I'm sending

you a Nav coordinate. When we are thirty seconds out from crossing that point, you will notify us, with a 5-second count leading into it."

>"Aye aye corporal."
"Carry on."

Satisfied for the moment, the marines set out across the bridge, headed for the lift.

"I still don't see how this is going to help" Miranda declared.

>"Don't care" Joker said definitively. "Just so long as I never have to do that again."<p>

* * *

><p>Sergeant Tolliver and the color guard had taken up positions near the door, exchanging shots with the mob outside. One warrior, more ingenious than the rest, used his biotics to fly towards the doorway at a speed impossible to track. He landed in the midst of the marines and swung an enhanced fist, catching Perez in the back of his knee. There was a sick crunch as it connected, and the young marine went down, screaming in shock.<p>

Before the biotic could wreak further havoc, Sergeant Tolliver stepped in, driving the spade head of the guidon stick into the Krogan's unprotected and very open mouth. The monomolecular edge slid through the solid mass of bone and brain as if it were non-existent.

"KILL!" He shouted, red-faced and furious. The point punched through the top of the skull, pithing the Krogan completely. A boot to the chest and Tolliver Spartan kicked it off the staff and into the doorway even as he shouted once more.

"Marine Corps!"

>His eyes were wide with excitement as he stood there, a grin on his face from the sheer amount of adrenaline running through his system.
"See Shaka Zulu! I told you we'd get to stab some bitches!"

* * *

><p>When she caught up to them in the cargo bay, Miranda Lawson found both marines strapping on packs of some kind.<p>

"Mind sharing with me what you intend to do?"

>"Kill some Krogans."
"I get that. I just don't see how you can get on the ground without shuttles."

>"You any good in a fight?" LaForce asked.
Her hands glowed briefly with biotic power in response.

>"Whatcha think Simon?"
"I can use her" the sniper replied coldly.

Before she could argue, there was a harness on her body and LaForce was latching a helmet shut over her head. Her back was to Bell now and she could feel his ammo case digging into her back.

"What the fuck?"

>"Get ready" Bell told her
"For what?"

>"The only rush that compares to sex" he dead panned.
"What the

fuck?"

>Joker's voice broke across the comm channel.
"30 seconds out in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Mark!"

LaForce waved his left hand in a complex hand signal. The deck gang hustled out of the cargo bay except for the chief, who stood by the main hatch controls with a helmet on himself.

>He tapped the control pad once. A red light came in the bay.<p>

LaForce and Bell started examining each other's pack straps. She could hear them counting out loud. "One-one, One-zero, niner, eight, seven, six, fife, four, tree, two one!" Red light became green. Suddenly she began moving away from the wall. _We're going to hit the bay door! Unless they opened it. But we're at 15,000 meters we'd never survive!_ That was when she felt Bell leap into the air and she was weightless for a long second, the Normandy becoming a rapidly disappearing object on the horizon.

"WHAT THE FUCKKKKK?"

"It's okay to open your eyes. You should really see the view". That was Bell's voice, an edge of humor to it. Slowly, Miranda complied. LaForce was on her side, arms and legs held out as they floated through the sky in free fall.

"I hate you."

>They snickered.
"I'm going to kill you both for this."

>They chuckled.
"Assuming of course that we don't get slaughtered by the Krogans first."

>They laughed, full throated belly laughs.
"You're making history, enjoying one helluva view, and you're worried about a few damned Krogans?" Bell snorted. "Your priorities need work."

"So" she said through clenched teeth "what's your plan, aside from getting me killed?"

>LaForce spoke up first. "There's a high-rise on a hill maybe 1200 mikes from the CO's position. Mr. White here is going to set up a hide and start punching holes through Krogans. You're going to cover his back."
"Isn't that your job?" She harshly asked him.

>"Nope."
"So what're you going to do? Sit back and eat popcorn?"

>"No, but where I'm headed its gonna be hot."<p>

They fell through the sky in silence. Miranda did have to admit, the view was incredible.

>"Did Major Hennessy plan this?"
Both marines laughed out loud again.

>"No. All Warrant Officer Kramer said was 'shit's hit the fan. Don't care how you get here, just do it.'"
"And we are free fall instructors."

>"During the covenant war ONI needed somebody to hunt down certain humans and encourage them to fight the Split-lips."
"Naturally they picked the best sniper and pistolero they could find and sent us off on our merry way."

The way they bantered back and forth was eerie. It was if they could read each other's minds.

"Were you two twins that got separated at birth?" She interjected.

>"It is entirely possibly. Except that we're enlisted men."
"Our mothers really knew our fathers."

>"Hold on tight" Bell announced.
The next thing Miranda felt was a sudden yanking sensation as the chute deployed. The descent slowed, she relaxed momentarily.

>"Great, now the Krogans can shoot us at their leisure."
"We're 4 clicks from the Old Man, land in" Johnny checked his watch, "2 minutes 7 seconds and we checked nearly a week ago, only hobbyists use chutes anymore. The Krogans have never heard or seen anything like this."

>"I'm still going to kill you" she affirmed.
"Take a number and stand in line" Johnny said lazily.

>"I don't know Johnny, she's better looking than 95 percent of the people in line. They might let her cut on principle" Bell suggested
"Maybe if she flashed them."

>"I'm not a whore!" She shrieked.
"How's your gag reflex?" Johnny asked casually.

>"I don't have one."<p>

Even as the words left her mouth, Lawson realized that she'd been tricked.

****SSV Normandy****

>"-don't have one."

Time seemed to slow on the Normandy's bridge as crewmembers looked at each other. Had they just heard that right? Then a shrill, angry, violent voice filled the comm net. Tali, and indeed most of the bridge crew blanched at the few expressions they could understand. They'd all seen Miranda upset, but this? This took the cake. Joker, on the other hand was laughing so hard tears leaked out the corners of his squeezed-shut eyes.

"I don't think you can do a foursome with a dog, a horse and your mother" the sensor tech whispered to the gunnery chief.

>"Who cares? This is priceless" the chief whispered back.<p>

"Joker" Tali asked in a voice as calm as she could muster "what is fisting and why does Miranda want LaForce to go do that with a krogan"

>The bridge crew fell apart completely, unable to hold it together any longer.<p>

* * *

><p>Landing on the roof of the building, Bell spilled the air out of their shared chute. "Normandy this is White Horse. Chutes on deck and preparing for the relief."
"Solid copy White Horse. Good Hunting."

>While Miranda rigged clay mores and shaped charges in the stairwell (occasionally shooting scathing looks at Johnny), the two Marines began writing Bell's range card. They looked across the landscape, making note of obstacles and dead zones where the sniper could not cover his friend.
Finally, all was ready.

>"Hell or plunder Devil-Dog" they intoned as they slammed armored vambraces against one another.
LaForce went over the edge on a rappel line Australian-style, running down the side of the building, while Bell rolled into place with his rifle, sighting on the jammer

the Krogans had established.

>"We're gonna do you bunch of toad-looking jackasses like the monkey did the miller's wife."
BAM. BAM. BAM. Three massive cartridges were ejected from the rifle in rapid succession.

>Down range, the jammer suddenly started to tilt earthward. Which is expected when holes the size of a fist appear in the main support struts holding it up. It crashed to the ground in a shower of sparks and screaming metal.<p>

"Sir, comm's back up!"

>"Shepherd get ahold of the Normandy!"
"Normandy this is Shepherd, how copy?"

>"We read you loud and clear Commander."

>"Tali, not that I'm not glad to hear your voice, but where's Ms. Lawson at?"
"She went dirt-side with White and Pale."

>"What?"
"It wasn't by choice, they sort of kidnapped her."

>Shepherd buried her head in her hands. "Where are they now?"<p>

A pair of Krogan biotics were barreling forward towards the compound, hands a-glow with power and their shields fully charged. Before anybody could react, the face of the Krogan on the left erupted in blood. He pitched forward, the remnants of his jaw catching the ground and pitching him end over end. His companion lasted a hair longer. He turned to see what had happened, stopping in mid-stride. It was the last mistake of his life. A hole wide enough to put a fist through appeared in his head. Hennessy swore he saw daylight on the other side of it.

"And I saw and behold a white horse. And he that sat on him had a bow" he breathed.

The chatter of Smith's machine gun from the rooftop as he began laying suppressive fire on the mob brought the next verse to his lips unbidden, even as Jimenez' shotgun barked, followed by the flash of a black blade. An unearthly scream followed, was cut off as vocal cords severed in a horizontal slash.

"Sir," it was Smith. "You've gotta see this."

Miranda had to admit, she was impressed. Bell lay prone out behind his rifle, a steady stream of cartridges from the bolt-action rifle. It was single-shot rather than magazine-fed. From what Simon Carlos (she'd finally learned his first name!) said in between shots, trying to machine magazines for 30mm wide cartridges was not a task they'd had time for yet. Even the ammunition was experimental, something they'd only read about in a book series printed on Earth nearly 200 years ago.

Her job right now was to hand him cartridges so he could stay in position. He drank from a camelback bag in sips, rubber nipple firmly clenched between his teeth.

"Reach in my pack and grab the jerky please."

>"Next thing you'll be asking me to make a sandwich" Miranda grumbled.
"If you've got enough energy-**BAM**-to make a sandwich, you're-**BAM**-not getting laid properly-'**BAM**'" Simon told her as he accepted the jerky and a fresh cartridge.

>"TouchÃ©."
"Thank you."

>Clenching the jerky between his teeth, he slid the cartridge into place, worked the bolt, and sighted down range.
"Don't take what Johnny said personally." **BAM**
>"How can I not?"
"It's part of playing with the boys." **BAM**
"If you get ass hurt, he'll lose respect for you."
>"That's weird" Miranda replied, confused.
"Nope. Part of what a man is." **BAM** "Cussing his ass out was the **BAM** best thing you could have done."
>"Why?"
"Shows you ain't afraid."
>Miranda felt herself smiling once again. Perhaps there was a bright spot to this day after all.
"Should do that more often."
>"Do what?" Miranda asked innocently. "Cuss out functioning sociopaths with guns?"
"Naw. Should smile more often. Looks good on you."
>Miranda had nothing to say that.<p>

* * *

><p>Hennessy climbed the steps to the roof two at a time, Shepherd and Williams behind him. Smith had set up the near the edge, concrete bricks and I-beams forming a decent parapet. Bizzle from the color guard lay beside him with spare barrels and magazines ready to swap out at a moment's notice.<p>

Stooping, the trio ran to join them, ducking behind the parapet for safety as Shepherd cast a field around herself and Hennessy to keep them safe.

>"How we doing Nevada, Bizzle?"
"So far so good sir. Caught 'em in the open early on and they've been playing it safe ever since" Bizzle answered as he spat Tobacco juice onto the bare concrete.
>"What's going on? Reinforcements?"<p>

"Nothing like that sir" Nevada said politely as he laid off firing. "We just figured you'd want to see what the Pale Horse of Death looks like from the opposite side of things."

Following his outstretched finger, Hennessy saw what he meant. The mob that had been pushing towards Urdnot Wrex's compound was no longer facing toward the Krogan Battlemaster and his allies. Rather, a hole was growing in their rear. The edges of the crowd were spreading out, forcing the whole mass into a crescent shape. At the center of the bulge- a man wearing a pale green skull-faced helmet. In his hands rested a flame-spitting herald of death. And it was talking loudly. Even as they watched, three Krogans went down, single shots taking them through the brain pan.

"Since when has a carbine packed enough punch to one-shot a Krogan?" Shepherd wondered aloud.

>"It fires 11mm hard-tips with iridium cores. Normally those rounds take down Cape Buffalo. They'll do for pissed off Brutes in a cinch."
"What about the cannon?"

>"That's probably White Horse. He mentioned he was working on a project with LaForce, never told me what it was."
"_Krogan-killer Sir_" Bell's voice announced over the comm net.

>"Like the name, sergeant" Jane replied appreciatively.
"_Thank you ma'am._"

>"Carry on sergeant" Hennessy intoned.
"_Aye aye sir._"

>Looking at the swath they were cutting through the crowd, Jane realized that LaForce would be at Gatalog in mere seconds. "He's going for Uvenka isn't he?"
"Appears so. Detail, holster, holster,

holster!"

>The fire from Wrex's compound ceased. Friendly fire never is.<p>

"Uvenka you cowardly bitch! When will you show your face? Or are you scared of one puny human?"

>The die had been cast, and if the Krogan did not meet his challenge, Uvenka would lose all of his support at once. And he knew it.<p>

"Filthy fucking humans. Always making a mess of things!"

From the rooftop, the whole Normandy contingent and a good portion of Clan Urdnot's leadership watched.

>"If your human wins" Wrex remarked "he is one very lucky man. I'll need to take him gambling with me."
First Sergeant Torrez shook his head. "If that Krogan wins, he's the lucky one."

>"Oh?" Wrex cocked his head over to look at Torrez. "And why is that?"
"LaForce is from Comanchero Parrish on New Pittsburgh."

>"So?" Williams persisted.
"Most lawless county in Human space" Sergeant Tolliver barked cheerfully. "He's famous there."

>"So why did he leave?" Williams asked, though she was fairly certain she already knew the answer.
"Between the dueling and the thieving, he killed a lot of people. Enough that they gave him the option of enlisting or a hanging party."

Traitor stood opposite a cleared circle from LaForce who still had his visor down. "What are your terms?"

>"I win, all of you serve Urdnot Wrex."
"And if I win, all of you wretched humans die."

>"Deal."
They began to shift around, moving right to left.

>"Say when Frog face. Say when."
"So arrogant for a human. Your whole pathetic race is like that."

>"I'm so pathetic I only killed 37 of your bitches before I got to you."
A growl rose in the background. The assembled Krogans didn't like that fact. But they could respect it.

>"Tell me something, if you're so great and badass, why were you leading from the rear? Afraid to get hurt by one of us pathetic humans?"
That struck a nerve in the Krogan. He roared as he reached for the shotgun on his side.

Ashley Williams thanked her lucky stars that she was recording the whole scene. Otherwise she wouldn't have been able to slow down the video and actually watch it all take place.

Even as Uvenka reached for his shotgun, LaForce's pistol cleared leather. The range was less than 10 meters and he began fanning the hammer of the revolver that filled his hand. Six shots barked out in a continuous thunder, striking Uvenka's face. LaForce border-shifted a second pistol up into action, six more shots filling the air. A third pistol, then a fourth. Uvenka was spilling blood and his face looked as if it had been mashed into a high-powered blender. The shotgun slipped from his hands as he fell to his knees.

>"Damn y-" his voice cut off as he face-planted into the ground. The muscle spasms ceased and everyone assembled knew that Gatalog Uvenka was dead. The Urdnot Civil War ended as abruptly as it began.<p>

* * *

><p>Benjamin Sato hated slavers. Especially child slavers. He'd been all of 16 years old when slavers dropped on Minato. The colonists, peaceful Buddhists, hadn't stood a chance. He watched his parents killed even as he pulled a younger brother and sister to safety. Murder, slaughter and rapine were everywhere. He left his brother and sister in the hidden basement, then went hunting with a wheat scythe and a hammer.<p>

The marines whom found him were roundly impressed with his efforts. A staff sergeant by the name of Hennessy was so impressed with the young man that when they lifted off the planet, young Benjamin was bedded down amongst the marine contingent and bound for MCRD Lejeune. As the young man's career progressed, he and Hennessy would continue to bounce into each other, Hennessy carefully advising him and grooming him in the way that seniors are supposed to nurture successive generations of the Marine Corps. When he graduated top of his class at ODS school, Benjamin Sato naturally selected Delta Company, under Hennessy as his first duty assignment. And in the three years since then, he'd given the officer who became his surrogate father no reason to regret that effort made. Tonight, he did for others what Hennessy did for him so many years before.

The targets within the compound were Batarian slavers, operating without the knowledge or approval of their government. Benjamin had reason to suspect otherwise. He wasn't going to ignore it. Not that he'd complain if such a thing fell in his lap. The instructions to the assault team had been relatively simple. If they found uniformed officials, the Batarians were going to be exposed. If they found illegal arms sales (to include ships) to known slavers, the Batarians would be exposed. If they found enough evidence, somebody was going to get their world rocked.

"Marksmen, mad minute."

>On each of the four corners was a guard tower 15 meters high and just large enough for two guards to stand in. Beyond that, fully a dozen and change could be seen patrolling the dark confines of the slave pens. The only way to take them all down without raising the alarm was a mad minute contest. All four snipers had one shared minute to take them down, losing score to be determined by least kills. Loser buys the beer.<p>

Suppressed subsonic rounds reached out through the darkness, dropping first the guards in the towers then the men inside the perimeter. Death welcomed home 23 that night, all bound for hell's embrace.

Even as the tower guards fell from their perches, the assault team ran for the open gate on the northern side. They had to secure the comm shack, followed by the guard barracks and the launch pad. After that, they'd deal with the slaves.

>Phut-phut-phut-phut-phut-phut.
"AT&T reach out and touch somebody."_

>Comm shack is secure Benjamin thought as he moved towards the barracks. Within it was dark.
Every one of them is asleep he mentally rejoiced. With barely a whisper, his wakizashi came out of its belt sheath as he began slitting throats. The other men in the assault team took this as their cue and followed likewise.

>"Head's clear" Wolf Man hand signed even as blood pooled around his feet. The mute Cherokee preferred a tomahawk for blade work. This he

wiped across the shirt of the dead Batarian to clean the blood off.
"Somebody call for a cab?"
>Shuttle pad is secure Sato thought elatedly.
>"Hit the slave pens and start moving them to the pad a group at a time. We have two hours to sanitized and gone. All teams copy."
"We got a clown car."
>That had come from the landing pad team, something was up.<p>

While the others moved to the slave pens and started that process, Sato jogged towards the landing pad.
>"Potting, talk to me."
"There's a luxury yacht over here on the pad. Got some passengers of interest."
>Oh please let this be what I think it is Sato prayed.
>At the base of the ramp, potting and two more marines had the detainees covered.
When Sato saw whom it was, his eyes narrowed.

"They also had these." Potting passed him a stack of flimsies in evidence bags.
>When Sato finished looking them over, he had a shit-eating grin on his face.<p>

"Put them in the holding pen over there, we'll move them after we get the slaves out of here."

Two hours and thirteen minutes later, the last load of newly freed slaves were headed upwards toward a colony ship the forty thieves had acquired and refurbished for just such a purpose. Below them, the camp burned cheerfully. All that was left to do would be deal with the guests. Very valuable guests. And realistically, what else could you call the Batarian Permanent Foreign Undersecretary and his staff?

7. 10 November

Devil's Own Ch. 6

10 November

Yes, it's a long postponed update, but it's here finally! Enjoy, and know that the next chapter is already half-complete.

Some changes have been made to the story in previous chapters. Never fear dearest readers, this will not change the outcome- ARM-BARS EVERYWHERE!

>KORRD: you're about to get your answer, this is part one.<p>

I still own none of the series involved, nor any songs of which I may make reference to in the course of this story.

And if you've never been to a Birthday Ball ladies, go find a man in marine dress blues and fix that problem, it's the party you'll never forget.

* * *

><p>In every battle and skirmish since the birth of our corps,
Marines have acquitted themselves with the greatest distinction,

>winning new honors on each occasion until the term "Marine"
has
come to signify all that is highest in military efficiency and
soldierly virtue.
>~Commandant John A. Lejeune<p>

THEN:

>SSV Normandy

Most of the crew had assembled on the mess deck for the evening. Not only to finally hear the story of Grunt's rite of passage, as well as the fight afterward, but because this was a special night for the Marines. 10 November, birthday of the UNSC Marine Corps, and regardless of wherever they might be, marines across known space would pause to commemorate the birth of their Corps.

It began solemnly enough, with a ceremony: the birthday message by their original commandant, the remembrance of the fallen dead and missing in action, the cutting of the cake. The cooks had laid in a decent-sized feast and from the sounds everyone made it wasn't a bad meal. Not at all.

The Horsemen and color guards sat at a table perpendicular to the head table, with a massive pot from the galley containing something that smelled fairly potent. Shepherd had no idea what it was, only that they were getting ready to be hammered. Alcohol wasn't allowed onboard ship. Strictly forbidden. In this day and age, the taxpayers and the Senate expected their military men and women to be plaster saints. She snorted faintly in derision. Fools. That rule was broken so flagrantly it no longer shocked her.

"Penny for your thoughts Jane?" Hennessy asked politely.
>"Just wishing I lived in your world" she stated wistfully.
"And I would not mind yours" he said. "I only wish I knew the fate of my earth."
>"Was it your home?"
Mike nodded. "I had thought to retire there, if I survived the war."
>"Doing what?"
"I wanted to be a musician when I was a boy."

>"And I wanted to be an actress."
"But here we are" he said with a grin.
>"Thank you by the way".
Now it was Mike's turn to be confused.
"For what?"
>"This" she said gesturing at the laughing, carousing chow hall.
"It's nice to have our pride back."
Michael looked around at it all and smiled. "Yeah, I guess you're right."
>"Sir." It was the first sergeant, to his left. "Gunny says he's ready."
"Well then, let's be about it." Michael stood to his feet.

>"Corporal Bell, Sergeant LaForce, front and center!" The first sergeant bellowed, the Jaeger bombs and Patron Platinum he'd consumed thus far seemed to have had no ill-effect on him.
The two NCOs popped to their feet, then marched to the head of the room.

"You two present me with a unique problem. If we go by the book, you absconded with government materials for personal use, threatened a junior enlisted, heedlessly endangered this ship and its crew, kidnapped an officer and placed her in extreme danger, engaged in fighting with an allied race, murdered 71 of the same, and engaged in an illegal duel."
>"Yes sir!" They chorused.
"And by the book I'm going to punish

you" Michael said.

Gunny Moore appeared at Michael's side bearing a cloth coved tray.

>"Attention to orders!"
Instantly those present jumped up, backs straight, heels together at a 45 degree angle, thumbs along the trouser seam. Across the years and dimensions, some things are unchangeable amongst those whom live the martial way.

"On the 7th of November, while securing an alliance with the Krogans of Clan Urdnot, the SSV Normandy command group came under fire from hostile forces and quickly found itself outnumbered and under-gunned on the surface of Tuchanka. Prior to a comm jammer being erected, Warrant Officer Kramer put out a call for assistance."

>"Responding with the experience gained from a combined 16 years under arms, Sergeant LaForce, Corporal Bell, and Lieutenant and Civilian Advisor Miranda Lawson performed a High Altitude Low Opening parachute drop into the combat zone from the frigate Normandy during a high speed pass, establishing a base of fire in a nearby high-rise."
"During the course of the firefight Corporal Bell made 34 confirmed kills, bringing his total to 705, tying the record previously held only by Simo Häyhä of Finland. His efforts broke the main thrust of the enemy's attack on the command group."

>"At the same time, Sergeant LaForce made a one-man assault upon the enemy's rear. Finding himself in the heart of the enemy formation, the sergeant challenged their leader, one Gatalog Uvenka, to a personal duel. Having done so, the Sergeant rapidly drew and fired 24 shots into his adversary, utterly ended the Clan Urdnot Civil War, preserving not only the entire command, but the alliance with the Krogan species."
"Their actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps. For courage and gallantry in combat, the Naval Cross, 2nd award is awarded to Sergeant J. Tecumseh LaForce and Corporal Simon C. Bell."

These were pinned on easily. But instead of releasing them, the two marines were told to stand fast.

"Know ye that reposing special trust, confidence in the fidelity and abilities of Simon Carlos Bell, we do appoint this Marine a sergeant to rank as such from the 1st day of November 2185, and do strictly charge that all personnel of lesser grade are to render obedience to appropriate orders."

The third chevron was held to his uniform, sealing there in a moment as the adhesive formed to the fabric.

>"Congratulations sergeant."
"Thank you sir."

>"Sergeant LaForce."
"Sir."

>"In ancient times, a common soldier could rise by degrees. A man who was sharp with a blade and his mind could become a duke, a baron, a king even. And you sergeant, are more than a common soldier. In fact, I do believe that our Battalion Commander's wife called you a well-educated Christian gentleman."
"Yes sir. She did sir."

>"And not only are you that, but still every inch a professional soldier, a vicious, life-taking, heartbreaking, capable soldier. In the coming war, humanity will have a need for such. To lead, to guide, to inspire, to follow through the storms of death and destruction. Consider this your punishment."<p>

Johnny stood very still, but his mind was racing, what the hell does

the Old Man have planned? The cloth came off the tray with a flourish and two gold bars gleamed against the silver backdrop.

"Know ye that reposing special trust, and confidence in the fidelity and abilities of J. Tecumseh LaForce, we do appoint this marine a Third Lieutenant, his commission having been earned on the field of martial valor, to rank as such from the 1st day of November, 2185. We do strictly charge that all persons of lesser grade render obedience to appropriate orders."

LaForce felt unable to move as they pulled the red and gold chevrons off of his sleeves. A single gold bar was placed in either shoulder, then hammered into place with a closed fist by the Major and Lieutenant Vetter. Vaguely, he felt the sharp metal points dig into his skin. This was insane! Nobody in their right mind expected a Comanchero Parrish man to be an officer!

And yet here he was. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. _Damnit all to hell_ he thought.

"As a third lieutenant, you fall under the Warrant Officer until I decide you're ready to command on your own. Listen and learn from him. You've the makings of a very good officer."
>"Thank you sir."
"Dismissed."
>"Aye aye sir."<p>

First Sergeant Torrez stepped up and pounded Johnny on the shoulders with either fist."Congratulations sir!"
>"Thanks Top."
"Oh you're welcome sir!" The first sergeant replied enthusiastically, pounding on his shoulders with every syllable.

I'm gonna need a doctor to pull these damn things out Johnny realized. _I really need a painkille_r. Looking left he saw his relief.

"Sergeant Tolliver!" Johnny barked.
>"Yes sir!" Tolliver said, rising to his feet as he did so.
"Is your Artillery Punch ready to serve?"
>"Absolutely sir!"
"Them my first order as an officer is that you're going to fill my canteen and keep it filled until we are Winchester. Is that understood?"
>"Aye aye sir!" Tolliver said with gusto.<p>

"And on that note" Patrick interjected "Corporal Smith, give us a tune."
>"Shall we have our new officer pick sir?"
"By all means Corporal. By all means. Third lieutenant, what song would you care to hear played?"
>Johnny looked up from the canteen Sergeant Tolliver had almost finished filling.
"Nevada, I'm from fucking Comanchero Parrish, the hell you think I want played?"

Smith acknowledged this by punching the start button on an audio player hooked into the chow hall's speakers. Johnny raised the canteen to his lips even as the song began to play.

_ "If it hadn't been for cotton eyed Joe_
> I'd been married a long time ago.
> Where did you come from,

> where did you go,
> where did you come from
> Cotton eyed Joe?"

Having drained his canteen in a single hard chug, Johnny tossed it to Tolliver before he leapt up on to the table and commenced to doing a jig while electric violins and banjos cut the air. The marines were slapping the table now, cheering him on as he danced the length of it.

Jane looked at Hennessy as he joined in the slapping. There was a joy and merriment on his face as he watched the young officer's antics. It was rare to find a commanding officer with as much time in as he did who could maintain discipline and morale.

Johnny went down the table, made a column right and leapt over to the Normandy contingent's table. The grin on his face was undeniable, and he caught the freshly refilled canteen deftly, unscrewing the cap to down another round of punch as he moved along, boots pounding to the rhythm of the beat.

"Work hard, play harder major?"
>"Absolutely."
"What's artillery punch?"
>"Mix black tea, dark rum, red wine, rye whiskey, brandy, Benedictine and fruit juice to taste."
"Oh. That sounds strong."
>"It is. Tolliver's been working on it since we came on board."
"I thought you were all infantrymen."
>"Most of us are. But after you do a tour with the NAVSPEC-OPS, there's an invitation to attend ODSST school and do a tour or two with the division. The warrant officer is a Sapper, Tolliver is my cannon cocker and mortar maggot. We've got several odds and ends around here."
"They certainly get the job done."
>"That they do." He looked over his shoulder. "We'll want to leave soon."
"Oh?"
>"Ever heard of the Gungan Booty Dance?"
"No."
>"You don't want to find out."
"My cabin is sound-proofed."

>"Sounds outstanding."<p>

As they made their way through the hatch, Kramer let out an ear-splitting screech, much like an orangutan gone crazy.

* * *

><p>Shepherd's Quarters
>True to her word, Shepherd's quarters blocked out all the sound. As befitting the captain of the ship, hers were the largest rooms onboard, with a small sitting room for entertaining guest attached to the bedroom and the head. What most occupied Patrick's attention were the thickly cushioned, high-backed chairs in the center of the room. He collapsed into one, grateful for the reprieve of silence, his nose enjoying the smell of warm leather.<p>

"Care for a drink?" She asked as she opened her liquor cabinet.

>"Rum if you have it, with cola."
"Of course."
>He sank back, eyes closed in contemplation. There was something different here, something he couldn't quite put a finger to.
"Here you go" Jane said, handing him a tumbler before she sat down herself. "So, how long do you think they'll be in there?"

>Hennessy checked his watch. "It's 2147 now, probably till midnight or so. The Horsemen'll probably knock off around 02 or 03. Except for LaForce and Bell."
"Think they're gonna have a chat with somebody?" she asked.

>"Yeah."
"I wonder what Johnny is gonna do about Williams."

>"What do you mean?" Hennessy queried.
"The gunnery chief is a fairly good girl. Who happens to have set her sights on your chief rogue."

>"Enthusiastic Bible reading perhaps?"
"Songs of Solomon no doubt" Jane retorted.

>They both chuckled, then Johnny raised his glass. "Your health."
"And yours" Jane replied, taking a sip from her own.

Silence prevailed for a moment. Then.

>"Still it could be worse."
"How so?"

>"Could be the ship's captain who wonders if a certain Marine Major is gay or just dislikes redheads."
Johnny looked over the rim of his glass as he sipped from it once more. Jane looked stunning in a naval dress white uniform. _Self, this is very dangerous ground to be in right now._ He set the empty glass on a side table, then turned his full attention to Jane.

"One" a finger went up "You're the first woman I've ever considered an equal."

>"Two, if something happens and we have a nasty break up, my boys and I'll get kicked off the Normandy."
"Three, I'll be damned if I let my dick screw my boys over."

>"Four..." Before he could say anything further, she'd wrapped her hand around his and placed a finger on his lips. When he was silent she spoke.
"Fourth is that I'd like you to remember I'm a big girl."

>Yes, yes you most certainly are Patrick thought in a rather detached state.

>"I'm not going to kick you out just because we get mad at each other. I need you too much for that."
"Nice to know I'm needed."

>"Very. But if you don't help me out of this damned uncomfortable uniform, and take me to bed right now, I will throw your ass in the brig and leave you there till we land on the Citadel."
"Aye aye ma'am."

Much later, Michael and Jane lay tangled up together beneath the sheets. She'd tucked herself into his side, a rather perfect fit Michael thought cheerfully. And those curves were not only real, but large and perfect. He ran a finger down her side, smiling at the woman who'd roped and hauled him off to bed as thoroughly as a Comanchero cowboy rustling cattle. Both of their bodies were covered in with sweat. She was definitely the most energetic woman he'd ever taken to bed. And the most loving. Which wasn't surprising because he'd felt himself falling for Jane across the course of the weeks. She was a damned incredible woman, the kind a man could respect, love and admire all at once.

"Jane" he said quietly.

>"Yes Michael?" She said looking up at him with those gorgeous cornflower blue eyes.
"Would you be mad if I said I was falling for you?"

>"I was actually thinking the same thing about you" she

admitted.
He smirked. "And if I said you had a beautiful body?"

>"I might hold it against you."<p>

Michael's last conscious thought was to send out a mass message to the men. On pain of death, neither he nor Commander Shepherd were to be disturbed till at least 1200.

>This way, he thought, _I can get at least 4 hours of sleep_.

* * *

><p>NOW:<p>

CITADEL COUNCIL HALL

"Who do you want sir?" Torrez whispered.

>"The Red Horseman" Hennessy said without hesitation.
"Sergeant Smith, report to the commanding officer!"

There was a brief flurry of footsteps and the machine-gun toting Marine stood tall in front of them, muzzle at low ready.

>"Sir."
"Sergeant, the Asari is going to form a brief link with your mind. She'll only be able to see what you let her. Cole Protocol no longer applies." His voice dropped to a whisper "Show nothing of Jack."

>"Aye aye sir."
Smith about-faced, deploying the bipod and releasing the bulky crew-serve from its sling points so he could set it on the ground.

>"My name is E'moo Ha'brera, please relax and be at ease."
"Which is right before everything goes straight to hell" LaForce whispered to Bell over their private loop, grateful to have his visor down.

>"Yeah no shit" Bell replied.
"Embrace eternity!" The Asari cried out, her hands on Smith's head.

Meanwhile, the Horsemen spoke amongst themselves, something to pass the boredom, for there is nothing so boring as waiting for politicians at position of attention.

>"Gotta love that idiot Sparatus. Did he really think we'd let him arrest the Old Man?" Bell asked.
"He's a politician, what did you expect?" Jimenez replied.

>"Brains" Simon stated flatly.
"Right" Johnny drawled out "go get a leg up on Lawson while you're at it."

>"Been there done that, night of the Ball. How are things with you and Williams."
"What about her?"

>"She's been asking about you when you're not around. We all figured you were putting the moves on her" Jimenez declared.
"I'm still waiting for Lawson to try taking my balls off with a rusty spoon."

>"She ain't Bun-Bun."
"No but she could be a Bunny."

>"Very true."
"I must say I admire your choice of first date material. A HALO drop onto a building, followed by a leisurely afternoon spent fighting genetically bred killing machines."

>"At least I got a date. Sir."
"TouchÃ© sergeant."

Smith and the Asari sat unmoving still.

>"Hey Jimenez, how long do you think they'll be there?" Johnny asked
"Long enough for Nevada to get to third base."

>"Two more bases than your Pirates will make it to this season, sir" Simon suggested.
"Fuck you" Johnny replied casually "go suck Shockley's dick."
>"You mean that Anaconda he was tea-bagging Krogans with?" Jimenez replied.
"Please tell me you're kidding" Bell pleaded
>"As Kulkulan is my witness" Jimenez swore "he did it on Tuchanka after he killed one that got too close."
"He needs to go whaling again. Soon. Or he's gonna start trying to hump the Normandy's exhaust port."
>"Might break the ship."
"Definitely a bad thing."
>"On a positive note, Normandy's crew finished paying up" Johnny announced.
"Bout damn time" Bell grumbled.

Ever since the marines had come aboard the Normandy, a betting pool had existed on whether or not Hennessy and Shepherd would have sex before they returned to the Citadel. The odds started at 3 to 1 against the Marines, and every passing day saw more money added to the pool.

"And how much did we make?" Jimenez asked.
>"3500 credits" Johnny replied.
Bell whistled appreciatively.
"Suckers should have remembered that Marine Ball plus dress blues equals flying panties."
>"Who cares? I want dinner at someplace nice" Jimenez said.
"Herald the Apocalypse, sir?" Bell asked hesitantly.

>"Damned right. I may be an officer, but if you're good enough to die with, you're good enough to share chow and drinks with."<p>

And on that note, Johnny realized, I should ask Williams to lunch.
"HUD, give me a listing of garden cafe restaurants with human edible food on the citadel, top 3 highest reviews."

Within his mind, Nevada Smith watched his life scroll past on the one side, while on the other he saw E'moo's life doing the same. For a moment he was shocked. He hadn't expected her memories to be in here too.

> I am giving them to you so that you may trust me as I trust you she thought across the mind link.
> E'moo stood beside him, wearing a dress that shifted from one shade of green to another.
> "It's incredible" Nevada told her.
> "Your mind fascinates me" E'moo said.
> Scenes from Second Harvest played past them.
> An ambush on Tyr's World as Nevada let loose into a covenant patrol with his machine gun. They fell like bowling pins.
> A covenant plasma artillery barrage as he ran through the jungle, the other four horsemen alongside him, laughing and whooping with glee.

Intermixed were scenes of E'moo as she gained her adulthood amongst the Asari. Becoming an aide to Matriarch Tevos.
> The Reaper Sovereign appearing at the Battle of the Citadel.
> Her first thought when Nevada removed his helmet.

He turned towards her, his face a mixture of emotions as he took her hand. White light filled their view, a glowing orb that expanded exponentially with every second. Then suddenly, all was quiet.

Nevada opened his eyes. He was still seated cross-legged on the deck across from E'moo. She was looking at him with wide eyes and a very kind smile.

>"We will speak more of this later" she told him across the mind link. Then she turned to face her Matriarch. "These men speak the truth."

Whomever spoke next would decide their fate.

In this case, it was Tevos. "Major Hennessy, may I assume that you have a plan for dealing with this threat?"

>"You would be correct to do so" Michael said in a very neutral tone.
"If we give you our support, will you prosecute this war to the best of your abilities?"

>"Define support."
"Troops, materials, industries, our armed forces."

>"Will I be considered an equal to the council or subservient?"
"You will report to us at our pleasure" Sparatus declared.

>Michael held up a hand. "Stop right there. Because such a relationship will not work."
"Excuse me?" The Turian councilor said in disbelief.

>"Councils and debates are well and good for the civilized world. A military, a true martial force, does not spend time in deliberation. They see the problem, immediately determine an answer and respond accordingly. I cannot, will not, subject the men and women under my command to the shameful behavior this council exhibited when Salen Arcturus and his Reaper attacked the Citadel."<p>

The councilors bowed their heads collectively. It was not a proud moment for any of them.

"If I am to command, I must have the full support of the council, and any military decisions I make will not be questioned by this body. Our survival depends upon it."

>"What would we call you? Admiral perhaps?" Tevos asked.
"Councilors" Sparatus said suddenly "We forget ourselves. Without councilor Udina, we cannot vote as a quorum."

>"Yes, where is he?" The salarian asked.<p>

Without even looking, Michael knew his Horsemen were grinning. Like clowns in a circus. A memory of blood and teeth on a pristine deck. Clowns, hell they were grinning like tigers at dinner time.

A Turian C-Sec officer tapped Sparatus on his shoulder. "Honored Councilor, Councilor Udina is in the hospital."

>"What! How did this happen?" Sparatus demanded.
"A mob was demonstrating outside his residence. Over the video."

>"Video?"<p>

The salarian councilor was looking rather queerly at a data pad handed to him by an aide. The projector in the center of the room came alive. Udina's blood covered face, missing teeth and all, filled their view.

>"You work for me Shepherd!"

> She laughed, a throaty, husky, mocking laugh.

> "You pompous windbag. I work for the people of the Citadel Alliance."

> "Bullshit! Fuck those stupid peasants. You work for me. And if you don't start giving me answers, I'll send you back to the mud with the rest of them."

"Oh my, what a very unwise thing to say" Sparatus said politely.

>"He had to leave his residence by air car. On his way here, he was hit by a cargo hauler whose steering column locked up. All in the car were killed, but the councilor. He's in a coma and the doctors don't know when he'll wake up" the C-Sec officer declared.
"Thank you Sergeant." Sparatus gaze was significant. "Until a new human councilor is sent here, or Councilor Udina recovers, we cannot give you any further support. The law forbids it."

>"We understand" Hennessy said, equally polite.
"Thank you for your report, Spectre Jane Shepherd. Please leave us, we have much to discuss here."

>"Of course."<p>

As the two officers marched back towards the formation, Kramer issued instructions to the formation, bringing them back into marching order. When Hennessy and Jane were back in place, he took his spot beside the formation.

"Warrant Officer Kramer, conduct us to the Normandy!" Michael ordered.

>"Aye aye sir! Detail, aten-hut! Right shoulder, Harms!"<p>

CRACK! SLAP! CRACK! Like a clockwork machine.

"Pipes and Drums, Black Bear! Platoon, Forward Ha-arch!"

Boots slammed into the deck as drums began to play, a crashing martial crescendo. They left the Hall in perfect order, a void of silence filling their wake. Like the sea after a shark feeding, where only emptiness remains.

>"Those are ruthless humans" Sparatus said. "Entirely un-afraid of violence."
"And very capable of it" Tevos replied. "E'moo, tell us what you saw."

The aide came forward quietly.

>"These humans have seen much of war, and they refuse to believe they are vanquished. Their ships are dwarfed only by the Citadel itself. And their fighting spirit."
"What of Hennessy? Tevos asked.

>"His men love him. He leads them into Hell and gives them Heaven for a reward. They will follow him no matter the price."
"Is he really preparing for war against these 'Reapers'?" The salarian asked.

>"What I saw was not much, Major Hennessy is very careful with whom knows what information."
"But what did you see?" Sparatus demanded.

>"They are preparing for war, and I now believe this- we will win or die gloriously in the doing."<p>

* * *

><p>BREAKER YARD: UNNAMED GAS GIANT

Barron followed Rimjob and Benny across the handholds as they maneuvered towards the hatch. Excitement had given way to shock.

There was no way this should be happening.
>This is all a prank, a bad freaking dream Barron thought repeatedly.
"I'm at the hatch" Benny announced
>"Slice it or blow it, I don't care which" Barron ordered.
"If this Titanium-A we don't have enough explosives to blast through."

>"No need" Benny replied from the hatch. "I'm in."<p>

"Soapy, how do you copy?"
>"Loud and clear."
>"We're gonna stop for a snack break, open up the bananas we have in our frame. If you don't here from us in four-fife mikes, assume we took a nap. Give us a soft poke."
"Solid copy. Enjoy your snack."

The door whirred open and the three marines flung themselves inside.

>"Oxygen is clear and breathable" Rimjob declared after consulting his scanners.
"Sounds good to me. Let's get to engineering, we can check the drives and any records we need to from there" Barron decided.

Rifles out, three men began moving down the dark hallway, pencil-thin red beam of their laser designators stabbing through the darkness.

>"We're two decks down from Engineering, maybe 6 bulkheads."
"Ship looks like its still in lockdown."
>"No corpses" Benny said quietly.
"This better not turn into a damned zombie-aliens-horror flick" Barron grouched.
>"I want Domino's Pizza and a Lakers' game" Rimjob announced.
"Thanks Rimjob" Barron and Benny chorused.

>"Engineering up ahead, looks like we'll have to open it manually" Benny declared from his spot on point.
"Benny take the door, Rimjob clear left, I'll go right" Barron ordered.
>"Errrrrr" the junior marines answered back.<p>

In short order, the engineering room was cleared. Except for the sound of their footsteps and easy breathing, it was deathly silent. A harsh white light blazed overhead as Barron read through the computer logs.

>"So it looks like they got here the same way we did. Slipspace jump gone bad."
"Psi Serpentis was in 2546, they've got to have been here nearly a decade" Benny said, face screwed up for a moment as he did the math.

>"According to the log, they arrived yesterday" Barron replied, drawing looks of shock from both men. "By the time he made the jump, everybody was..."
His voice trailed off as he snatched up his helmet and rifle.

>"Benny, Rimjob, follow me!"<p>

Without a word, they followed Barron, sprinting to stay alongside him. He stopped just short of a hatch that they knew well enough. Labeled "CRYO BAY", it was the only place on a Valiant-class super cruiser big enough to hold her compliment of sailors and marines.

Suddenly Barron began chuckling.

>"What's so funny sir?" Benny asked.
"I just realized, if I'm right about who's on the other side, the Old Man won't know whether

to kill us or thank us."

>"So long as we get pizza somewhere along the way I'm fine."
"Fuck yeah Rimjob!" Benny said enthusiastically, slapping the door release as he plunged forward without any orders from Barron. Rimjob followed him, moving through the open hatch then sliding right. Lights came on in the room.

>"Clear port!"
"Clear starboard!"

>"Entering from the rear!"<p>

What greeted Barron's eyes were rank after rank of cryogenic tubes. Through the frosted glass faces he could see that they were occupied by people.

"Jackpot" he whispered. Then a realization hit home and he looked at both of the marines. "Where is the ship's AI?"

>"Might be in stasis.
"Hey sir, why don't we go find him and see if he can answer our questions, just so this doesn't turn into a horror flick?"

>"Good thinking, spread out."<p>

It took only a couple minutes to find him, several more to thaw him out manually, but what they got in return was a man whose real life exploits made covenant fleet masters wake up in a cold sweat at the thought of facing him.

>"Good afternoon sir!" all three marines barked as they stood side by side in perfect positions of attention, weapons at 'rifle salute'. Which is a smart choice when standing before Vice Admiral Preston J. Cole.
"Good afternoon marines. What the hell are three ODST doing on my ship?" the admiral grumbled. "Not that I'm not glad to see you three" he added as an afterthought.

>"Sir" Barron said formally "The short version is, we're all in an alternate timeline almost 350 years before Psi Serpentis."
Cole glared at him. "Warrant Officer, you better not be bullshitting me. Otherwise I will space your ass like last week's trash."

>"Sir, what if we thaw out your command staff so we only have to explain this once?" Barron suggested mildly.
"Sounds like a plan warrant officer. Anubis! Time to work you digital bastard!"

>The AI pedestal in the center of the room clicked on audibly. The blue figure whom emerged wore the face of a Jackal on a man's body, dressed like an ancient Egyptian. In either hand were the ankh and flail, symbols of his authority over the dead.
"Admiral" it said in an inhumanly cold voice.

>"Wake the command staff. Have them report to my ready room. Get engineering and cooks up next. I want engines and chow hot in 35 minutes."
"And the rest of the crew?"

>"Wake them up by ship's divisions. And turn up the heat, its fricking colder than my first ex-wife's heart in here."<p>

Off to one side of the conference room Barron spoke over the radio with Soper.

>"Get ahold of the Old Man, tell him 'Adios Mother Fucker' then wake everybody up, and get ready to make a fast jump out of here."
"Roger" Soper said, voice scratchy through the gaseous interference.

>Benny nudged him. "We're on sir."<p>

Cole stood at the head of the room. "Ladies and gents, listen to these marines." He looked knowingly at Barron. "You're on warrant."

Barron stepped up to the head of the table.

>"In 2546, Battle Group India engaged the Covenant at Psi Serpentis. The conclusion of Psi Serpentis came when you deployed 100 Shiva nukes into Viperidae's core. The resulting nova wiped out the covenant fleet. Everest was assumed lost."
"But we're all here so somebody's wrong" an officer declared from the far end of the table. Chuckles circled around the room.

>"Pretty much. In the 9 years after that, we made headway on what you did at Psi Serpentis. When the covenant arrived on earth, we'd bled them dry. Our company, Delta of 11, 105th MarDiv was making a drop on New Mozambique to assist in repelling the covenant beach head when an assault carrier made an inter-atmospheric Slipspace jump. We got caught in the coronasphere of their Slipspace portal, and ended up here."

>"Where is here exactly?" Cole asked.
"An alternate timeline, in the year 2185. The Covenant do not exist."

>"Halle-fucking-lujah" a Chief at the far end said cheerfully.
"Instead of the covenant we got about a dozen different alien races, most of whom hate humanity. Oh and a race of homicidal robots that want to wipe out all of us. And we don't know when they're supposed to arrive."

That took the wind right out their sails.

"I'm curious" the lone marine officer from Everest's contingent stated finally "what's your CO doing about this bunch of murderous toasters?"

>"He's trying to build an army and a navy. My platoon and I were detailed to steal ship hulls from salvage yards, then send them to a hidden refit yard we've started in the Wolf 359 system."
"Just who is your CO, Warrant Officer?"

>"Major Michael Hennessy."<p>

For a long second, it was quiet as they digested the news.

The marine broke the silence with a strange, almost cheerful question. "We got Michael 'Devil' Hennessy planning a war?"

>Barron nodded. "Yessir."
This caused a whoop of glee from the marine and he laughed as if it was the most uproarious joke ever.

>"I served with that black-hearted evil minded bastard on Mar HispaÑola. If he's running a war..." He shook his head, wiping away tears of joy. "God, it'll be good to see him again."
The ship's executive officer looked over at Cole. "Nice to see you've got competition for biggest living legend status Admiral."

>"Thanks XO" Cole said, with a smile before he looked over at Barron. "So where exactly is the Major at?"
"Honestly sir, I don't know. I've already passed him word through a dead-drop system. We'll know within 24 hours. In the meantime, I've passed navigational data to your AI, once we clear the gas giant, and collect my men we can leave sir."

>"Captain Stamos, I want us underway within the hour. Do what you need to."
"Aye sir."

* * *

><p>"Helmsman bring us about 13 flank and head out of the upper atmosphere."

>"13 flank and make for the stratosphere aye aye."

>The deck plates hummed slightly as the Everest gained momentum,

rising slowly away from the nameless gas giant.<p>

"Captain, we are clear of the magnetosphere."

>"Good. Warrant Officer, you mentioned a freighter?"
"Yes sir."

Barron opened a channel up. "Soapy, how're we doing?"

>"Ready to go home whenever you are, bearing 651 on your port flank and headed for the barn."

>"You sure you'll fit?"
"This is the Dale Doback, all we need is enough lube."

>The captain's face took on an interesting color when he heard that, and some of the bridge crew looked around in surprise.
"Roger that Soapy, bring her on in nice and easy."

>"That's not what your sister told me to do last night!"

Barron closed the comm link, only to hear an "ahem" come from behind him.

"So, Warrant Officer, when was the last time Major Hennessy conducted annual training of EEO violations, SAPR training, or Sensitivity and Cultural Understanding?" The Captain asked.

Damned if I do, damned if I don't Barron surmised. "Not in four years sir."

>"Why?" He asked, in a tone that stated Great Displeasure.
"We were busy satisfying all necessary ODSST qualification standards, as well as supply problems."

>"Supply problems! And your S-3 allowed this to happen without reporting it to the chain of command?"
"Very big supply problems sir."

>"Captain" Cole said idly "if you're finished questioning the Warrant Officer, I'd like to get moving."<p>

This brought a halt to whatever else the Captain might've had to say at the moment and he looked towards Cole somewhat embarrassed. "Yes sir."

"Status of the Doback?"

>"Doback is securing for jump to Slipspace, Bosun's Mate says he needs 47 more seconds to finish grapping it to the deck."
"Start one minute jump countdown."

>"One minute countdown aye aye sir."<p>

As they passed through the portal, the Captain finally spoke to Barron once more.

>"What exactly was the nature of your supply problem?"
"Ammunition shortage sir. The major figured in the absence of orders we ought to go out and kill something. We kept burning through our ammo budget making drops and killing hinge heads sir."

>"How many drops did you perform Warrant Officer?"
"99 in three years sir."

>The Captain's eyes went wide, and his voice dropped to nearly a whisper at the next question."How many casualties?"
"61 dead. 113 wounded, only 17 critically."

>Barron's voice was grim now. "We killed the equivalent of two and a half brigades. We really were a little too busy."
"Warrant Officer, I take back what I said, I meant no offense."

>"Yes sir."<p>

Honor satisfied, the Captain leaned back in his chair. Cole shot him

a glance. "Look on the bright side Captain. At least this murderous evil bastard is on our side."

* * *

><p>And that concludes today's fun ladies and gents. Expect the next chapter within a week or so.<p>

8. Hearts and Minds

The Devil's Own Ch. 7

Same rules still apply, I don't any of this trash, except what characters I have created within the given environment. And if you haven't watched the movie Solomon Kane, you're wrong.

Semper Fidelis my brothers.

* * *

><p>Hearts and Minds<p>

Hell's coming to breakfast

__The Outlaw Josie Wales__

Terra

"So why does the old man want us to get these?"

>"Dunno."
The high and tights were gone, replaced by fashionably longer hair combed neat.

>"Looks like it's got the same security setup as all the rest of them."
"Yeah but you know how particular he is."

>They wore tourist attire, posing and taking pictures of everything. Only a very talented security expert would notice how their pictures took note of guard posts, camera locations, the mooring lines and the unsealed hatches.<p>

"Probably why we're sergeants and he's a Major."

>"True. Hate to have shiny on my collar though. All the damned headaches."
"Yeah but officers get better looking women."

>"TouchÃ©."<p>

Maroney made a show of checking the program, lest anybody take an interest in them.

>"So Wolfe, one thing I can't figure out" he said slowly.
"Yeah Brandon?"

>"How the hell are we gonna get 58,000 tons of steel into orbit and not get caught?"
"I'm still wondering how we're gonna do it four times."

>"Have to be simultaneous jobs."
"Wait, they're just smaller than the Normandy right?"

>"Yeah. Oh..."
Maroney looked back thoughtfully. "We need to go shopping."

>"Yup, think a freighter and two ore haulers would work?"
"Oh yeah."

As they walked down the ramp, both men looked over the ship one last

time. A relic of the days when men had fought upon deep waters for control of them. She had been at her current post nearly two hundred years, in peaceful repose, her guns and magazines empty. Yet, when one looked upon her, they could not help but admit- she was still a fearsome vessel of war.

* * *

><p>Maroney was addressing a 24-man crew deep within the basement apartment they used as their base of operations.
"Our first problem is 's a six hour difference between Hawaii and Norfolk. No way to get around that either. The teams at Camden and Norfolk" he pointed at Quisano and Giordano "will insert at 2245 Hawaii time. Los Angeles, you'll do the same. Each team will install an eezo generator that's already been hooked up to a shield projector, and cut the moorings. We'll create diversions as necessary in civilian police comms to keep them busy and away from the area. You have 17 minutes."

In the next room over, Wolfe, was briefing an equally important team. They were mercenary pilots.

>"At 2300 Hawaii time, you're going to be 50 meters AGL at these coordinates" he said as he passed papers to each of the eight pilots and co-pilots.
"The team you carry with you is going to hook a load up by a length of anchor chain, which you'll pull straight up into orbit, headed for this point in the asteroid Belt."

>He tapped a glowing purple point between Mars and Jupiter.
"The team will go EVA from your ships, disconnect the payload and you'll receive payment."

>"How do we know we'll get payment?" One of the pilots, Santander-born if memory served Wolfe correctly.
"One and a quarter-million credits will be placed in escrow at the bank of your choice."

>"So, what are we hauling" asked a Frenchman in a beret.
Wolfe brought up the picture of their cargo. The Santander swore.

>"You came recommend as the best pilots in the business. The first ship to the rendezvous point will receive an additional 750,000 credits."
Four pairs of eyes gleamed at him in the half-lit darkness. 2 million credits was a lot of money. More than enough to retire and live comfortably.

Darkness had just arrived in Honolulu when four thieves swarmed aboard their target, knocking out guards in rapid fashion. Two more were backing a flatbed truck up to the loading dock. Anti-grav carts carrying their prepared loads quietly hummed as they came to life, moving with a purpose up the loading ramp. These were bolted into place against bulkheads, then turned on.

>"All systems green."
"Signal Dog House that Mary is a go."

"Mary is a go" the radio operator at the other end of the transmission repeated.

>"Mary, Noreen and Wilma are all clear, status of Ira?" Maroney asked nervously.
"Ira just checked in, they're green too."

>"Dirt divers beginning final approach now."<p>

"Hijo de puta, este loco en cabeza". The Santander pilot, Felix, was muttering darkly as he settled into place, hovering a few feet off Mary's bow. The team onboard were outside the rear, hooking the massive anchor chains up onto the magnetic plate across the rear of the ore hauler. Hand signs flashed and they scampered back inside,

followed by the thieves.

>"We ready to go yet?" Felix demanded.
"Closing the hatch now."

>CLANG
"Go."

Slamming the throttles wide open, Felix uttered a prayer and kissed his rosary as he headed upwards, fighting gravity and a bad case of nerves to boot. "Either we gonna make it or, we gonna fail badly." _Hijo de puta, I should never have left home. Lord, if I live, I swear I'll marry Maria in a church properly._

As the ore hauler and her cargo picked up speed, the anti-grav field kicked in, lifting them free of the water. Magnetically attached rockets on the bow and stern fired simultaneously, providing even more of a boost. Felix's eyes watched the dials and displays, his hands making micro-adjustments.

"We're passing through the atmosphere!" He called out.

>"Firing secondary boosters in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, ignition!" A marine yelled back.<p>

Unlike the first quartet, mounted vertically to get them up, these were amidships and horizontal, pushing the load in the same direction as it was being pulled. If it didn't work exactly right, they'd know in short order, when they failed to break free of Earth's gravity.

Seconds crawled by, and then... "Okay pendejos, we are free of Earth atmosphere and headed the hell out of here!" The sound of high fives was loud in the back. Pulling off the impossible merits such elation.

At a freighter in the Asteroid Belt, Maroney and Wolfe waited anxiously. The speakers crackled suddenly. "Mary is headed to the river with her boyfriend."

>"Hell yeah!"
The other three followed in short order. Their symbols came up in the plot tank as blue arrows, all headed for the rendezvous at maximum speed.

>"Sensors, how long till the police catch on?"
"Earth Security is just now starting to sift through reports and the sensor data".

The Marine seated next to him reached down and pressed a button on his keyboard. "That's a shame, their main sensor hub just had a server crash."

>"Oh?"
"Yeah, amazing what happens when an IED cuts the power trunk leading into the server room. Guess they should have buried it deeper."

>"Wait doesn't that also control all of earth's traffic control?"
"Yeah, but it switches to local control and everyone gets grounded until further notice. Even the Po-Po's."

>"Nicely done Ice."
"You know I enjoy a chance to say fuck the police." Ice looked over towards his three fire team members, all busy tapping away at computer screens. "Tell 'em where we from!"

>"Straight outta Compton!" They chorused.
"Damn right!"

>"Some day, when we're not on the run from God, the Easter Bunny and Johnny Law, you gotta tell me how you four made it past the filters" Maroney declared with a chuckle.<p>

"Bring some Remi and we can do that."

>"How long to ETA?" Wolfe asked.
"2 hours, 19 minutes."
>"Good, I'm gonna go see Palmela and Handgelina, let me know if something happens."<p>

In any event, if hookup and lift off were white-knuckled hell rides, docking and re-coupling to the Brennan Huff was equally quiet and easy. Or at least as easy as hooking 208,000 imperial tons of steel to the back end of a cargo freighter in the middle of an Asteroid Belt can be. Felix made it there first by a minute, netting him the bonus. The other pilots were given smaller bonuses, if only to help buy their silence.

Then, remaining on the far side of Mars so as to be shielded from Earth view, the Brennan Huff opened a slip-space portal and made the jump to Wolf 359, her cargo following along like beads on a string. The portal closed, leaving no trace that they had ever been there.

All over Earth, the news sources clamored to be the loudest. Somehow, in the middle of the night on the Western Hemisphere, 4 World War Two-era relic ships had been stolen from their moorings. Police were baffled. Earth Security was stumped. Conspiracy theorists postulated their ideas all over the Net. And yet, no one could explain it:

>How does one steal the battleships Missouri, Iowa, New Jersey, and Wisconsin, and not get caught? And where had they been hidden?<p>

* * *

><p>TORTUGA<p>

Ship's AI Captain Jack Sparrow was King of Tortuga, a training ground cum shipyard and defensible bastion Michael Hennessy had ordered built. It had begun life as an abandoned science vessel grounded on an asteroid and gradually been expanded upon. Nearly three months after having arrived on Horizon, it had grown to include a salvage and construction yard, training vessels, and a recreation ship.

Here, Jack performed the duties of a staff, gathering intel from the teams, coordinating their efforts, laundering money. Or committing outright theft in some cases. There was no hacker in known space with Jack's processing power, and following the money trail of organized crime gangs was easy. From there it was a simple matter of removing the money from a bank account and making it disappear through the ether.

Every day brought shipments of the new slip-space drives from Errikson Industries, missile pods, MAC tubes from Krupp Arms or autocannons from Rheinmetall Works. These in turn were mounted on ships' hulls covered by swarms of worker drones.

While not as hardened as Reach, Tortuga was covered with a satellite network more extensive than their own Earth, giving them real-time data on anything that moved within the system. Jack had created a series of dumb A.I.s to assist in the effort, allowing him greater flexibility in what he did. Heimdall controlled the satellite and sensor data, Vulkan ran the construction yard, and Ares worked in tandem with Argus to defend the system against intruders.

"Slipspace emergence detected." Heimdall intoned.
>"This is the Brennan Huff, with precious cargo for Vulkan" a speaker squawked in the control tower of Tortuga.
>Human operators began their checks and carried out their processes as the AIs went to work.
"IFF and security codes check out Ares, let them in" Heimdall declared.
>"Understood."
"Brennan Huff this is Tortuga Control, Nav points are set, follow them on in."
>"Glad to hear it, my boys are ready for soft beds and cold brew."
>The operator smiled cheerfully. "Understood bring 'em on in."<p>

As the ancient battleships settled into place at the yards, Vulkan reviewed the plans he had in his possession, along with the directives Hennessy had given him.
>"A dreadnought is exactly that- it dreads not a damned thing it comes across. I want these to be at least 4,000 meters in length, shaped like the originals, with the smaller guns and AAA moved to the lower portions of the hull to cover that arc of fire."
"No missiles or torpedoes sir?" Vulkan had asked.
>"No" Michael replied, "that's what we have destroyers and such for. These are designed to throw out shells. Lots of them. Big damned shells at long range. When they fire a broadside, the enemy will know it's been hit. Understood?"
"Yes sir."
>"You're also to incorporate the originals in these. This is Face-Hardened Rolled Homogenous Steel Armor, put it to use."

Vulkan had nodded in assent then headed into his digital workshop. The days that followed were long and frustrating. But he had created a masterpiece, one that was already coming together in the yards below. Four of them, skeletal frames surrounded by hundreds of thousands of drones moving pieces of the hull every which way, welding, fastening, wiring. The end result would be nearer to four-and-a-half thousand meters, truth be told, with two three-tube turrets mounted fore and aft.

From sharply raked prow to the more rounded stern where four massive exhaust ports rested, they were warships. And no girly names to them either. They bore the same names as their predecessors. That had been another of Hennessy's directives. "_These are fighting vessels, not fishing boats or pleasure cruises. Name them for battles or honored dead or states, hell even great statesmen. But if I find one politically correct tree-hugging hippie bullshit name, I'll lock you in an isolation canister with a power source and no way to turn off for fucking eternity."_

The drones had gone to work with a will. Drones never slept, never whined to union bosses, never needed sleep. With no idea when the reapers would arrive, every joule of energy had to be placed on output. And now, they had new pieces to add to the fleet. Soon enough, they would have sailors to match.

"Slip-space emergence detected" Heimdall announced to the night crew.

>"This is the UNSC Everest, carrying the crew of the Dale Doback, prepare to receive IFF transponder codes and authentication" the box squawked.
>"Holy shit!"
"Authenticating codes" Jack declared, "codes are genuine, let them pass Ares."

>"Somebody get Captain Anness up, and the react squad to the docking bay" the duty officer ordered. "And somebody make a new pot of coffee."<p>

DEEN LAGASSE'S

Johnny had to admit, it was a very nice restaurant. Each table was built into a secluded alcove, surrounded by greenery and a variety of flowers. It was a fragrant smelling air, and incredibly relaxed. Well, except for one man in a tailored three-piece white suit and matching tie with a crimson red shirt, leaning against the bar. His hangover had started to ease off, but bright lights still hurt, hence the sunglasses over his eyes. Right now, he contemplated his life, and the choices leading up to today.

Last night, the four horsemen had heralded the Apocalypse in style. Suits and ties at the fanciest restaurant, followed by carousing at the biggest Irish bar on the Citadel, they had been at it till the early hours of the morning.

>Damned lucky we're not all in jail or the brig right now he mused. _Good thing that idiot at the bar swung first, with a bottle in hand. _The patrons whom had started the fight figured 8 on 4 was reasonable odds. Except that when those 4 are ODST Marines, the 8 had better bring reinforcements. These had not, and paid the price in spades. Broken hands, smashed ribs, a busted knee in more than one case, fractured arms, Nevada had crushed one man's testicles by stomping on them repeatedly with his size 12E rhino hide dress shoes. C-Sec didn't arrest them, but it had been a close run thing.

Right now though, Johnny had a different problem. It wasn't the temperature, nor his position. Both of those were perfect. It was waiting for Williams. He checked his watch. 11:19. _Only 41 minutes till she gets here. Damnit._

>He signaled for the bartender and one appeared without delay.

"Sir?"
"Do you carry hard lemonade?"

>"Yessir. Any particular flavor?"
"Original, and a pitcher of water to chase."

>"Coming right up sir." The bartender went to work on his drink, and Johnny checked his watch once more.
40 minutes till she gets here. Damnit

* * *

><p>Miranda Lawson walked into a scene out of hell. Clothes and shoes scattered everywhere, with Ashley Williams at the center of it all, head in her hands.
"Ashley, what the hell is going on?"

>The pretty brunette looked up, eyes rimmed red.
_Uh-oh, she's really upset about somethin_g Miranda realized.

>In a dash, she was by her side, an arm around her cabin mate's shoulders.<p>

"What's wrong Ash?"

>"I have a date with Johnny in 40 minutes and I can't find anything to wear!"
Oh. "Where are you meeting him at?"

>"Deen Lagasse's, and I look awful! She moaned.
Miranda stared at her stunned, before pressing on. "Hey now, none of that. I'll bet we can find something just fine for you."

>"How? I won't even be on time!"
Woman, you have spent way too long in the marines Miranda decided.

>"Look at me." She took the younger woman's chin in her hand. "One,

we will find you something to wear. Two, you can show up whenever you want."
"But, but, but I'm a marine! I'm supposed to be fifteen minutes early to everything!"
"You're also a woman. Showing up fashionably late is like changing your mind every 5 minutes about the color of the carpet. It comes with the hormones. Now, go clean up your face and I'll help you. Okay?"
"Okay" Ashley said, still unconvinced. She stood shakily, then made for the head.

Miranda meanwhile pulled out her omni-tool. "Citadel cab service, how may I help you?" "I need a cab at the SSV Normandy's dock at 11:55, headed to Deen Lagasse's."
"Yes ma'am."<p>

"Now that that's solved, what do we have the most chaste good girl marine alive wear on a lunch date with the head bad boy?" She said to herself while looking over the drab assortment; Miranda realized the monumental task she had taken upon herself. She'd seen Simon's wardrobe. Even with his limited space, the man still knew how to dress to impress. _Ashley, you really need some fashion help girl. Damn it this is gonna be hard I thought. I might have to loan her some of my clothes._

* * *

><p>It was nearly a quarter after and Johnny had finished off the water, as well as gone to the bathroom twice. Still no sign of her. I've still got the table for another hour. Might as well order something strong-
>There was a commotion at the front entrance, followed by the crashing of one air car into another. He stepped around the bar, either hand reaching for the pistols concealed inside his shoulder rigs.<p>

Only to be presented with a view totally unexpected. It was Ashley, looking like a knockout. Head to toe, she was the epitome of stunning. Shiny brunette hair fell in waves of bouncy curls around a face only barely touched with makeup._ But it makes those baby blue eyes stand out so well_ he thought as his mouth went dry.

The dress she wore was a sleeveless summer piece, bubble gum pink with a tropical flower-and-vine design in white running the full length. It fell down to mid-thigh, swishing with every step as she gracefully floated along. The top showed off a diamond pendant twinkling just above her ample bosom in respectable fashion, tying off with a pair of cloth straps behind her neck. On her feet were a pair of white wedge heels that secured in a bow around her ankles, giving her an extra two inches of height.
>Puts her on eye-level with me Johnny noticed.
>"I'm here for lunch with Mr. LaForce" she said, in a sweet, lilting voice. The maitre de tripped over himself leading her to where Johnny stood. Men and women across the restaurant were checking her out, many of the women with obvious jealousy written on their faces. Johnny distantly heard at least one good hard slap. His hands relaxed fractionally as she drew near.<p>

"I'm sorry I'm late Johnny" she said by way of apology.
>Johnny bowed at the waist as he took her hand, kissing it for a moment. The scent of something other than the flowers in the restaurant filled his nostrils. A very nice scent indeed. "A lady is

never late. She arrives precisely when she means to."
Ashley giggled. "Flatterer."
>"Who? Me? Never." Johnny stated declaratively as he helped her sit down, then took his own seat.<p>

The conversation stayed light until dessert was proffered. Johnny couldn't remember a single bit of what he'd said, he was still trying to work his head around just how stunning Ashley was. Not that he was complaining mind you... but damn! When was the other shoe supposed to drop?

"Johnny, why did you ask me here?"
>Aw hell, guess that's how it goes he thought sardonically as he took a deep breath.
>"Do you remember that conversation we had aboard the Normandy about Jimenez?"
"Uh-huh."
>"There's something I need to explain. I'm a Christian, have been ever since boot camp."
"But I thought..."
>"I don't like how a lot of Christians act. That's why I don't talk about it."
"What do you mean?"
>"Just worshipping on Sunday doesn't count. It's living and behaving like you're supposed to, every day. A lotta Christians are hypocrites that make the rest of us who're trying look mighty bad."
"Not all of us are like that" Ashley said defensively.
>"I know, you're not" Johnny placated. "Hell, you're about the most real woman I've ever met in my life. Part of why I like you."
"Oh." She hadn't seen that coming.
>"What I don't know is what you think of me" he admitted.
She smiled shyly and looked down at her plate. "I'm still trying to figure that out" She admitted as her foot brushed along his leg ever so slightly.
>"Would you like to go for a walk?" Johnny asked suddenly.
"Absolutely."

Within minutes, they were strolling side by side through a park full of cherry-blossom trees. Up ahead was the Buddhist temple placed down by Japanese-descended colonists on the Citadel.
>Silence enveloped them as they walked along. Johnny, for once in his life, didn't know what to say. Bad girls were easy. Any man worth his balls knew that. If Ashley were a bad girl, he'd talk her flat in a heartbeat, and that pretty little dress would be nowhere near her body.<p>

But Ashley Williams was a damned good woman. And he really didn't want to screw that up. So what the hell did he say?
>"You look beautiful today."
"Thank you Johnny. You look like a dandy yourself."
>"I try to be."
A blossom caught his eyes. It was at the height of its bloom, soft pink petals spread wide. Within a day or two, it would begin to wilt, then break off and fall to the grass carpet underfoot. Reaching up, he snapped it off the branch, then placed it behind her right ear.
>"How do I look with it?" She asked him.
"Perfect" and then Johnny felt the strong sudden urge to kiss her. He did so, planting it on the tip of her nose.
>Wordlessly, Ashley looked at him, eyes full of wonder. Her mouth opened then closed partway.
Well she ain't slapped me or tried to run away. He wrapped his arms around Ashley and pulled her close, then kissed her as gently as he could.
>A detached part of his mind realized that this counted in its own

way as seduction, but at least he wouldn't get in trouble for it.
When they finally separated, she was smiling and her cheeks were noticeably flushed.

>"That the best you can do Marine?" Ashley said huskily.
"I ain't even started" he replied. Then kissed her with a passion that she met in equal measure.

And in the silent grove of trees, a cherry blossom fell from a tree. It would decompose over time, adding its nutrients back into the soil that gave it life, thus helping build the next generation of flower.

****Citadel Marriott****

Hennessey's comm set rang furiously in the darkness. He picked it up, then swore softly. "Waz wrong?" Jane muttered sleepily from her side of the bed.

>"Recall."
"Wha time is it?"

>"0437."<p>

A hand grabbed him by the hair and pulled him back into the horizontal position. "See this bed marine?"

>"Yes ma'am."
"You're going to put it to use, and afterwards, we're going to cuddle, then you're taking me to breakfast. I want bacon and waffles."

>"Aye aye commander Shepherd" Michael said with a grin as he slid under the covers.
"God I love a man who can take orders" Shepherd moaned moments later.

Nearly five hours after the call went out, Michael and Jane marched up the Normandy's ramp. Behind them, in the livery of Neiman Marcus, were three men with anti-grav carts carrying their own loads.

>"Busy morning sir?" Torrez asked from his spot in the passageway.
"Breakfast took a while Top."

>"Yes sir, of course sir." Both men rolled their eyes.<p>

"Tali, how long till we're ready to leave?" Jane asked over her omni-tool.

>"Anytime you're ready, engines are warmed up and pre-flighted. Joker just needs coordinates."
Shepherd paused in her reply as Michael gave her a quick kiss. "I'm gonna go see to my boys."

>"Don't take too long getting to the bridge" Jane told him. "Joker, set your course for Tortuga."
"Yes ma'am."

****The Forge****

On Tortuga's only habitable planet, a colony ship was offloading its cargo- 971 newly freed slaves. They were the remainder of those freed by Sato's team. The other 1500 or so had chosen freedom, and were given a small amount of money to see them home. The remainder had chosen a different path.

Everywhere one looked, they would find instructors in black utilities running platoons of raw recruits. The eleven week course Hennessey conceived was simple. Separate the mentally weak and physically incapable from those who fit the graduation criteria, give them a basic martial discipline, then send them to their assignment.

The senior leadership came from retired SNCOs and officers Shepherd

had vetted as a Spectre. They didn't know where they were, only that they had signed a two-year contract, and that everything was being done in great secrecy. Some assumed it was a chance for humanity to break free of the Citadel Council, others believed it was a new colony expansion program. Still others thought it was a secret army to attack the Batarians with and liberate all of their slaves. In some ways, each group was right.

Slavers had ripped these people from their homes and destroyed their lives. Family, loved ones they would never see again because of death by disease and famine whilst in transit. These sought revenge. Hennessy understood such motivation. He fully intended to give them their revenge. They would work for it, but by the time all was said and done, the freed slaves would have earned the right to deliver their reckoning.

Basic drill, marksmanship, physical training, and a great deal of martial discipline were all instilled, without regard for politically correct thought or behavior. Hennessy's statement was simple- no fuck around time. Train until you drop, then train some more.
>They had no showy uniforms either, just simple black utilities. When graduation came, they'd wear the patches Hennessy had had bulk-ordered. Upon a field of gold stood a red lion rampant. Those in Delta whom knew of his love for books understood the reference.<p>

From where he stood watching, Preston Cole felt a certain level of astonishment. From standing start to this, in 7 weeks, was monumental.

>"So, how much longer till the first class graduates?"
"8 weeks sir. We move along at a pretty fast pace."
>"What about drops?"
"We're trying to keep it under 35%."

>Stamos winced. "What will you do with those?"
"Techs and support staff. Unless they're scum, the Major keeps 'em."
>"It'll be hard to get them battle ready before the reapers arrive."
"No sir. Not the way the Major figures."
>"Oh?"
"He figures if we can give them revenge on the Batarians, they'll be ours for keeps and we'll have the experience we need."

>"Hmmm. I see. So what does the illustrious major need me for?"
"Because I can't run the ground campaign and the space battles all at once" came a voice from behind them. It was Hennessy followed by the Horsemen and Shepherd.
>"Good evening Major" Cole said politely.
"Good evening sir" Hennessy replied.
>"I suppose congratulations are in order for a job well done." Cole waved a hand toward the view. "Still, I've seen some areas that need work. We also need to discuss exactly how you intend to fight these murderous bunch of toasters. Got anyplace I can sit my happy ass down and get some real coffee?"<p>

"Captain Anness?" Hennessy intoned.

"Conference room is all set up sir" that worthy declared.

"Well done. Admiral, let's go plan a war."

After a long hiatus and deep argument between myself and the muse, I'm back! Many thanks to all those who kept pestering me to update, you helped me resolve some problems I was having with the direction I was taking the story. As some have noted, I've been dealing more with the Halo side of the house in this piece, and needed to delve more into the character aspects of Mass Effect. I will try hard to do that, because Mass Effect does have some well-made characters.
>I still own neither series, and still hate being a (nearly) broke blue-collar shmuck. Maybe one day I'll get lucky. Now without further ado, ladies and gentlemen...<p>

* * *

><p>The Devil's Own, Chapter 8<p>

The darkest places in Hell
>Are reserved for those
>Who maintain their neutrality
>In times of Moral Crisis.
>~Dante Aligheri<p>

"Michael Hennessy assumed command of Delta Company less than thirty days after Mar HispaÃ±ola. 6 weeks after doing so, the company launched a raid into Covenant-held space aboard a captured Phantom. They returned with 25 KIA, 93 walking wounded and the skulls of all 407 garrison defenders. Hennessy would receive his second Navy Cross, and fifth Purple Heart. A raid two weeks later garnered a new Phantom. A third raid in as many weeks netted the first live Huragoks for study by ONI.

At ONI's urging, and with the Commandant's blessing, Michael Hennessy began an active recruiting program, building a reinforced company where the most junior rank was Corporal, and the standards were gruelingly high. On 11 November, they were separated for detached duty. Two days later, a covenant supply depot disappeared in a massive explosion. This was the first hint of what was to come. Over the course of 3 years, Michael Hennessy and his company would dance around Covenant-occupied space. Using modified bulk freighters, hijacked enemy vessels and the ingenuity for which marines are famous, they made 99 drops and 52 in-force raids into enemy territory. Much of what we know about the Covenant that forestalled their invasion of Earth came from data gathered by the Devil and his Daemons (as they came to be called in the media).

Delta Company's crowning achievement came when they killed Covenant Fleet Admiral Tir Gal'adan. Utilizing their captured Phantom, they smuggled a dozen Shiva mines aboard during a routine refuel and resupply, then remotely detonated it. The resulting explosion destroyed both the Assault Carrier and eleven of its twelve escorts. The Fleet of Vengeful Reckoning and Judgement would not be deployed at Reach for this reason.

By the time they received orders to report to Port Nassau, Hennessy had been promoted to Major and his unit had a kill record on par with Spartan-117. Their actions, played up by the mass media and embedded reporter Patrick Richardson provided a bright spot for humanity during much of our darkest hours.

-Esther Nakagawa, Time Magazine.

* * *

><p>Trevor "Doc Nasty" Aikman waited patiently as he worked his way through the room. It had taken a week to get hired here at the Citadel's Trauma and Injury Ward as a janitor. Thanks to Captain Jack circumventing HR's system, it was practically guaranteed. A week to get the routine on the floor down, a few more to build trust with the C-Sec officers outside the room, and a lot of waiting. The Major had been quite explicit on the matter.
"I want the bastard dead, but wait and do it when we're ready" he'd said.

So Doc Nasty had waited patiently. He had an apartment close by, a fridge full of pizza and beer, plus time with the occasional Oriental working girl on station. All in all, a cushy job compared to other assignments in Delta Company. Still he kept a wary out for the dead-drop message signal. Life was easy, but he missed his brothers, and the sooner he could kill this bastard the better off he'd be. Cleaning toilets got old fast.

"You have a message from 'Sunny Kool' the computer announced when he awoke that morning. Nasty blinked, checked the screen, then whooped. Hallelujah! The day seemed to pass by in a blur, right up until he arrived outside the private trauma recovery room.

"How're you doing today Larry?" a guard asked him as he showed his ID at the door.

>"Same old Joe, just looking forward to getting off work and going planetside for the weekend" 'Larry' replied.
"Sounds like a good thing" the other guard said as he held the door open to let the cleaning cart in. "Just knock like always when you're done."
>"Sure thing fellas, see ya in a bit." Larry replied.<p>

Within the room was cool and dark, the monitors showing only that the man on the bed was inactive. Doc Nasty went to work quickly. He had 5 minutes to get in and out. Far more time than he needed, but one always makes allowances for Old Man Murphy. Pulling the needles from within his cart, he plunged one into the femoral artery of the left leg, another into the femoral artery on the right leg. Both substances were inert until they met, when they would form a binary toxin. In this case, the toxin would form in the target's heart. The toxin would spread to the brain, consuming all neurons which it encountered. When there were no neurons left to consume, it would break down into it's component elements. A toxicologist could catch if the sample was less than 2 hours old. Otherwise, the death would remain a mystery forever.

Finishing up, Doc Nasty walked out the door. From here he had maybe 10 minutes to arrive at the loading dock where a disguised cargo freighter would pick him up and head for Wolf 359 at top speed. Whistling jauntily as usual, he walked down the hallway, dropping off the cart in its storage closet. Grab his go-bag from his locker, hail a taxi and he was off. Sticking around for interrogation after having killed Donnel Udina was not a wise choice. C-Sec had a proclivity for using asari when necessary to get confessions. And getting caught after this was not in his best interest.

* * *

><p>"Company, Atten-HUT!"<p>

4 bone-tired platoons snapped into position of attention. One by one, platoon sergeants gave their reports to the company commander, who in turn saluted and reported to Hennessy.

"Class 001 reporting Sir!"
>"How many graduates?"
"217."
>"How many failures?"
"183."
>"Very well. You may post and carry on with the ceremony."
"Aye aye sir."

The drill instructors began moving down the line, the first one carrying a brazier full of coals, the second bore a branding iron, while the third carried salt. One by one, the recruits received a brand on their right shoulder. Salt was poured into the fresh wound to make it permanent, marking them as indelibly as the eagle globe and anchors Hennessy bore on his collar. Theirs though, would be the lion rampant, just like the banners Hennessy had ordered be made for them.

When the instructors had finished, they stepped back, allowing Hennessy to take center stage once more. He could see their eyes, hungry, angry eyes. Some of that rage had to be directed at him, seeing as he was the evil bastard who'd orchestrated their pain and suffering these last ten weeks.

"There's a war coming. And humanity has need of soldiers willing to fight. For the last ten weeks we've run you ragged trying to find those hard enough to fight that war. 12 weeks ago, you were slaves. Now look at you. You have food, clothes, uniforms. And you have hate."

A growl rumbled through the assembly as the former slaves remembered their captivity. They remembered their captors well too, and the loved ones dead at their hands.

"In 23 weeks, another war begins. When On Full Kits is heard, who will join me?" He threw a finger skywards. "When the bugler sounds Board Ships, who will come with our navy to deliver the vengeance of God upon the wicked?" He picked up a guidon resting just out of sight of the recruits. "Who will follow these colors to show the Batarians what free men and women can do?" In the morning breeze, it snapped outward, a red lion rampant on a field of gold.

He had them now. Like a Pentecostal preacher mid-revival, the crowd hung on his every word. "Continue to train, continue to learn how to soldier, and I shall give your your vengeance. Who will follow me?"

Their shout of loyalty echoed across the red stone plains. It thundered in Hennessy's ears, and even Preston Cole was impressed by the power of his words.

Hennessy stepped back. "Company commander!"

"Sir!"
>"Carry out the plan of the day."
"Aye aye sir."

The pipes and drums picked up a tune as the new soldiers marched off the parade field, hearty pride in their step as their boots slapped

against the hard red rock. As he left the review stand, Hennessy smiled. _It's not a full-fledged army, but it will be soon enough. And it might just be enough to save us all,_ he thought cheerfully.

* * *

><p>Delta Company Mess Hall<p>

On Port Nassau, Hennessy had made it a point to construct a company mess, central to their barracks. The guidon, along with company war memorabilia resided there. It was where the troops, officer and enlisted alike took their meals, and where they socialized. No person not of the company could enter without sponsorship and invitation. Pretty women were always welcome.

Tortuga was no different. Finding a bartender had taken some work, but the woman behind the counter came highly recommended, liked their money, and enjoyed the thrill of working in such a top secret location. It was here that Hennessy and Cole discussed their plans for the coming conflict.

"The shipyard is moving along steadily, but we really need more purpose-built warships" Cole told him after they'd grabbed their drinks and taken a seat in a corner booth.

>"What's the difference?" Hennessy asked in between sips of ale.
"Warships have more armor built directly into the frames, reinforced structure, more heavy duty power runs, beefier engines" Cole elaborated. "Hell, even the munition bunker is purpose-built to withstand all but a real strong direct hit."

>"Oh." Hennessy's face fell.
"Don't worry, we can still use them" Cole said cheerfully. "Minelayers, gunboats, missile platforms, even ECM boats. Maybe anti-fighter platforms." He shook a finger cautiously. "Have to be careful with the last two. But they're doable."

>"Good, cuz Barron and Meach would be heart-broken if all their work was for nothing."
"Have to say I'm very impressed with Warrant Officer Barron. Didn't know ODST line companies had Warrants in their TOE."

>"We don't sir. Just promoted the men to where I thought they should be."<p>

Cole looked at him over the table. "Did you really plan to run a war all on your lonesome?"

"Pretty much."

>"Did you really believe you could win?"
"I had to try. Even if the only people who knew were God and my men."

Cole sipped his drink thoughtfully. "I read about you in the ONI dispatches. They worried over you."

>Hennessy raised an eyebrow. "Do tell."<p>

"Most of the analysts had you pegged for an empire builder. It actually came down to a shouting match with Admiral Parangorsky and Commandant Withrow."

Hennessy's face soured. "Hate that stupid bitch. She's spent too much time spent playing shadow games."

>"You won't find any argument from me on the subject" Cole replied.

"She forgot what being an Admiral really means." He drained the last of his drink. "It means we go down to the sea in ships, that we do business in great waters"
"Amen and absent companions" Michael intoned.

>"Absent companions" Cole echoed.<p>

"Major Hennessy, you have a priority call mate" Captain Jack announced as he suddenly appeared in holographic form on the center of their table.

>"Whom is it?"
"Prime Minister Amul Shastri, head of the Systems Alliance." Jack's voice dropped a notch. "Personally I think he's up to something" Jack whispered.

>"He's a politician" Hennessy growled.
"When aren't they up to something?" Cole answered helpfully.

>"Yeah, exactly." But I knew this point would come. "Patch him through to my data-slate."

>"Aye aye sir". Jack disappeared from sight.<p>

In a moment, the prime minister's face appeared on screen. He had dark complected features, but with a patrician's touch about them.

"Ah you must be Major Hennessy."

>"I am sir."
"Would you be willing to come and speak before Parliament?"

Hennessy cocked an eyebrow and looked at Cole, who shrugged in reply as if to say _sure why not_?

"I would."

>Shastri's face lit up. "Wonderful! We'll be looking forward to your arrival then."
"See you when we get there."

>"Yes yes of course. Have a good day."
"Can you remember the last time a politician looked so happy to see the Corps?" Hennessy asked Cole.

>The admiral's answer was quickly forthcoming. "Port leave on Gallagher's World. We pulled them out of an economic recession in four days."
"Nice. How about aside from drinking all the booze and screwing all the whores in port?" Hennessy said with a grin.

>"Right before shit hit the fan at about Mach Jesus."<p>

The bartender set down two new drinks before them.

"I was afraid you'd say that."

>Cole shrugged nonchalantly. "Just wait till you get a flag rank. I didn't get all this gray hair by accident. By the way, were you planning on taking Normandy for this trip?"
"Yeah. Why?"

Cole pointed out the viewport where Everest could be seen clearly.

"Because I want to scare the ever-loving hell out of that smooth-talking bastard and all his little cronies."

>"Oh." A grin split Michael's face. "Oh hell yes."
"Let your girlfriend keep investigating what she can about the Toasters. We need the support of the Systems Alliance."

>"And that means going without her."
"Exactly" Cole replied. "When do you want to leave?"

>"Captain Jack, please locate Commander Shepherd and let her know I

need to speak with her at her earliest convenience in our stateroom" Michael announced.
"Consider it done mate."

Michael knocked back the whole stein in a long gulp then slammed it down on the table. "How does 0600 tomorrow morning sound?">Cole grinned. "Like time enough for her to get over being pissed at you for running out the door on her."<p>

In any case, Jane took it quite well. No shouting, no screaming, no crying had conditions though.

"One, you'd better come back in one piece. Two, bring me back some chocolate, preferably the good stuff from Neiman Marcus."

>She rolled over to face him as his hands worked their way up her bare right hip. "I've become rather fond of you" she stated rather matter-of-factly.<p>

Michael leered at her. "I can't imagine why."

She came up on an elbow and shook her hair, causing other things to shake as well. Michael followed this movement with the natural male response to the sight of such spectacular mammary glands hanging freely. As he kissed and sucked and nuzzled on her chest, Jane leaned back.

"Greatest tactical mind ever they said! Most violent man alive they said! Hah! One shake of my tits and you're drooling like"- her voice caught in her throat as Michael adjusted fire right onto target. A moan escaped her lips and Michael grinned as he looked up at her. "Your move sexy lady."

"Give me a minute to catch my breath you rogue. Her gaze softened. "You realize you're the first man to make me feel like an equal?"

>"No, honestly didn't."
"Well you do. And it's a damned nice change of pace from the usual assortment of shits that come along trying to get in my knickers."

>"Well I'm glad to hear that."
"But I'm damn serious Michael, I have plans for the two of us, and it requires you be alive." She ran a hand alongside his jaw.

>"I honestly don't know why. I'm a bad man."
"You're more than that, doesn't matter how many people you kill." She glanced at the clock. "It's been a minute. My turn marine."

In the morning, there were three women on the observation deck watching Everest make for the Slipspace point. As it disappeared through the portal, tears formed. Fear of the future, fear of the unknown, fear of never seeing their men again. In the painful silence they came together in a huddle and cried. Such is the lot of women left to watch their men go off and do business in great waters.

* * *

><p>Arcturus System

Everest came out of Slipspace within the Oort Cloud stellar north of Themis. "All boards read green Captain."

Captain Stamos gave a small sigh of relief. Now to the task at hand. "Helmsman, take us forward at one-quarter flank, TACO keep us

stealthed."

>"Ahead 14 flank aye aye sir" the helmsman replied.

>"Stealth engaged sir" TACO reported.
"Navigation" Stamos directed "ETA to Arcturus Station?"

>"4 hours 11 minutes sir."
"Very well. Admiral sir, your orders?"

>"Carry on Captain Stamos, Major Hennessy and I will be preparing for the reception."
"Aye aye sir."

It had been a hectic two and a half months for Jordan Lowe. First the whole traffic system had crashed. Then they'd spent several weeks trying to fix the damned thing. And now it was giving him false readings again!

"Reagan, we need to restart the system, I think it's crashed again."

>In a moment his supervisor appeared, clearly not amused and at the end of her rope.
"What's it doing now?"

>"I've got this return coming in from the opposite end of the system. But we don't have any stations out there beyond the navy's passive platforms.
Reagan sighed and ran a hand through her stringy brunette dreadlocks. "Guess we'll have to restart your terminal and work from there."

>"Supervisor Thalline, we have an incoming call from an unknown sender" the VI announced impassionately.
"How is it unknown?" Reagan asked tentatively.

>"The vessel is not listed on any registry which I possess."<p>

By now, the whole control tower was staring at each other in curiosity and shock. What was going on?

>"Patch them through, over the loudspeaker."
"This is the UNSC Everest, requesting permission to dock with Arcturus Station."

>"VI, what's the bearing on that signal?"
"It's that mysterious sensor ghost which Mr. Lowe keeps getting a return on."

Oh shit.

Jordan found his voice first. "UNSC Everest, what is your business here?"

>"We come bearing representatives to meet with Prime Minister Amrul Shasti."
"Can you authenticate?"

>"Standby to receive our codes."<p>

There was a silence as encoded data traversed the solar system through satellites and relays. The green light on Jordan's screen came up. "Codes confirmed, proceed to the following coordinates. Do not stray from your flight path or you will be met with lethal force."

There was a sound strangely like laughter that came through the speakers. "Not a problem Control."

That was when alarms went off. What had formerly been a sensor ghost was now registering as one damned big dreadnought bearing straight down on them!

"UNSC Everest, what the fuck is going on?" Reagan shrieked.

>"Apologies. We came out of stealth mode." The voice took on a razor

edge. "Anybody stupid enough to shoot at us is going to die. Comprende cabron?"
"Yes" Reagan stammered.
>"Connection closed" VI declared a moment later.<p>

The room was silent for a moment. A timid voice spoke up behind their console. "It isn't really that big, is it? This Everest?"

Reagan brought up the sensor image on the main holo tank. There were gasps of surprise and more than a few profanities.
>"If I'm reading this right, she's half again bigger than any dreadnought anybody owns, except maybe the Destiny. And they're not emitting any eeze."
"Who the fuck are they?" A man in the corner remarked, verbalizing an opinion shared by all present.

* * *

><p>Parliamentary Hall

"Where the fuck did these clowns come from?" Special Agent Rice Teal asked no one in particular. As the Senior Agent of the Prime Minister's Security Detail, he was the final authority for who came and went from his station. Visitors made him nervous. Visitors in outrageously large dreadnoughts made him very nervous. Visitors that sailed with open missile ports and obviously armed guns made him downright religious. _Please God, take these bastards back to whatever hellhole they crawled out of_ he prayed fervently.

"Relax Rice" Amrul Shasti said soothingly. The Indian-borne PM enjoyed a warm and personal relation with his security chief. "If they decide to kill us now, at least we have the possibility of reincarnation to a higher state of being."
>"In that case, I'd like to be reincarnated as me sir" Rice replied. "I rather like my life."
"Except for the moments when it gets exciting, no?"
>"Sometimes even then I like it. Today is not one of those days."
"Everything will be fine my friend, be at ease."
>"I'll try sir."
"Besides, you're not the one who has to explain this to Parliament."

Teal's face broke into a smile. "No sir I don't, that's what you get paid the bigger bucks for."
>"Every man has their dharma my friend, every man."<p>

The doors to the Hall opened. "Ladies and gentlemen, the prime minister of the Systems' Alliance" an announcer intoned. As one, the assembly stood while Amrul walked down the center aisle and took his place at the head of the room. There were no reporters here today, Rice's instructions to the guard detail had been quite pointed. Even guests were not allowed in the viewing balcony. There was a squad of Marines at each entrance backstopping the regular security detail to enforce this order.

When all had been seated, delegates began clamoring for permission to speak. A part of this job I hate Amrul told himself. Like so many jackals fighting over a corpse. Fortunately, the system that alerted him when a delegate wished to make a statement also ordered them according to whom chimed in first. This time it was the senator from Jericho VII. That such a normally reserved woman wished to stand and address the Hall understated the stress they were all feeling at this moment.

>"The floor recognizes the Honorable Senator of Jericho VII. Madame, if you would" Amrul stated over the loudspeaker.<p>

She was a quiet, determined woman and approached the podium accordingly. "Mr. Prime Minister, there is a massive warship of unknown registry and designation holding position roughly 3.9 kilometers from where we stand. Is it at all related to the rumors coming from the Citadel?"

>"What rumors madame senator?"
"That a rogue human faction is building up for war, and that the Reapers are coming for us?"

>Amrul blinked in surprise, then chided himself. She was on the Intelligence Committee, and her husband's family had strong ties to ONI. If anybody were informed, she was it.
"Madame, that question is best answered by others than I. Sergeant-at-arms, open the doors and admit our guests."

Every head turned as those self-same doors swung open. Through them marched six men, four of whom were in strange black battle armor, bayoneted rifles held at right shoulder arms. Their helmets were each decorated in different colors, black with gray designs of the jaguar and feathered serpent, another had crossed red swords on either side, the third bore white feathers in ranks, and the fourth was the pale green outline of a grinning skull.

In the midst of these were two men wearing dress uniforms. The first was identifiable from his dress whites and peaked cover as a naval officer. Four silver stars on either shoulder board, combined with multiple hash marks on his sleeve indicated the many years he'd stood before the mast, his ribbons told the assemblage he'd served those years in combat. Those observing had a sneaky suspicion that the dreadnought parked off their starboard quarter was his ship, and he it's master.

The man beside him they did not know. And no matter how much Amrul had watched and re-watched the footage forwarded by the Citadel Council, every time he saw Michael Hennessy, it scared him. Somehow, the black uniform he wore in that moment made him more imposing than he might have been in any armor. It was creased razor sharp, every ribbon and qualification badge perfectly set. The black leather harness of his Sam Browne Belt gleamed beneath the harsh lights in sharp contrast to the stainless steel grip of his pistol. Everything about him proclaimed his profession- War.

The little cavalcade stopped at the foot of the dais. Those in dress uniform saluted, while the men in armor performed rifle salute. Amrul was unused to such honors being rendered and wondered what to do.

>"Make your right hand a knife, touch the corner of your eyebrow with your index finger, then bring it back down sir" Rice whispered helpfully.
He did so, and the men ceased to hold their salutes.

>"Major Hennessy can give you the answers you seek Madame Senator."<p>

Michael turned to face the Parliament, his face a mask of calm.

>"War is coming. Over the last four and a half months, Spectre Jane Shephard has found proof that the species responsible for the destruction of the Protheans has returned to our galaxy."
"Jane

Shephard is dead!" a delegate answered.

>"She lives" Hennessy barked back in reply. "And what's more, she sends that proof to you, in hopes that you have the brains and common sense to listen." From his pocket he withdrew a data crystal which he shoved into the reader. Compiled from across the last 4 months, it was an hour and a half worth of footage all told. More than enough to show the Parliament what they faced.<p>

When it was finished, there was silence. People tried to digest what they had just seen. But it all seemed so unreal. Surely this nightmare was simply that- and when they woke up, all would be well. Hennessy swore he saw at least one man pinch himself. Who would make the next move though? Would this be as difficult as the Citadel Council? Or would it get worse?

The delegate from Jericho VII found her voice first. "Major, Hennessy, that is your name correct?"

>"Yes ma'am."
"You are obviously a military man, but that's no uniform I've ever seen before. Are you a mercenary then?"

>The Horsemen visibly bristled. Before one of them lost what little temper they had, Hennessy intervened. "My men and I are from a parallel dimension, in the year 2552."<p>

Shouting and cat-calls erupted in the hall. Psycho-robots bent on the destruction of all organic life was fairly believable, but parallel dimensions? _Yeah right._ Calmly Hennessy reached into his pocket for another crystal, then inserted it into the socket.

Scenes began to play from Hennessy's life. Theta Durano, Tyr's World, Station Sigma Epsilon, the siege of Earth as the Covenant forced their way to the surface aboard Regret's ship. Delta Company as it launched out of Port Nassau, being caught in the Slipspace coronasphere. Horizon came into view then, and they watched his pod slam into the surface. They saw the defense of that small colony, heard Harbinger's voice declare the judgement of fire, death and destruction upon humanity. Watched the scenes of battle on Tuchanka and knew now that the armored men standing there were not simply parade ground soldiers.

>Before they could speak, Cole inserted his own crystal. Now they saw the battle of Second Harvest, of Covenant Fleets scorching planets, of Psi Serpentis when he mocked them and destroyed their fleet in totality.<p>

"In our timeline, humanity raced for the stars, unhindered for nearly 600 years. We come with that 600 years of space exploration, technology, and knowledge of war, and what it takes to survive, even in the face of the Apocalypse" Cole said in a voice of iron.

>"Would you marshal all of humanity for this?" a senator asked.
"If we do not, humanity will die" Cole replied. "I have walked the surface of worlds that were turned to glass. Never again."

>"Would you have us go against the Citadel Council?" another asked.
"No, send a new representative, one who will convince them to support us. If we marshal all of civilization against the Reapers, we can win" Hennessy said sternly.

>"Violence never solved anything!" a voice chimed in from the back.<p>

Amrul shook his head sadly, he knew that particular senator. A young

idealist from the Progressivist Party, he vehemently hated anything to do with the military, or capitalist economies. His current fiscal policies had driven his district into bankruptcy, and he was being investigated for money fraud.

"Tell that to Harold II, or Robert E. Lee, or the National Socialist Workers' Party. The Reapers do not care for peace. They only wish to destroy. They are not selective, all organics are their target, and unless we fight, they will turn our worlds into desolations, where nothing, not even bacteria, lives." The way Hennessy said it brooked no argument.

>"I have already spoken with the Citadel Council and they have agreed to support me, but until Earth and the Alliance are on board their hands are tied."
"It could take weeks to find a suitable representative" the peacenik replied.

>"No it doesn't" Amrul declared. "I nominate the honorable Senator of Jericho VII, Jenna Bristol as our new Councilor on the Citadel Council. Is there a second?"<p>

The voting was swift and in the affirmative. Peacenik abstained, which surprised neither UNSC officer at all. But if gaining the political support had been easy, building the army necessary to save themselves would be herculean feat.

Amrul, Jenna, several senators on various committees, and the UNSC officers met in a dining room to eat and discuss these very tasks.

>"We won't need to worry about R&D, just construction" Michael declared as he passed around a list. "these are companies which have the capacity and ability to make various components. The shipyards at Titan can put it all together assembly-line style."<p>

"This is a very thorough list Major" Senator King said as he looked up from the flimsy he was reading. "How did you accomplish all this in such a short amount of time?"

>"I have very capable men working for me" he replied with a straight face.
The Four Horsemen refrained from bellowing laughter only with great effort.

"It also cuts down on graft and stupidity" Cole growled. "The number of sailors and marines we lose because of that is insane. It ends now. Any manufacturer who screws up and cuts corners has to pay for the mistakes out of pocket. If one of our personnel dies because they did it, I'll shove them out an airlock without a suit myself. Pass that on to your constituents."

>"Not a problem Admiral Cole" Senator Loeffler declared. "Not a problem at all."<p>

* * *

><p>Elsewhere:

"Step back from the control panel Kenson!" Jane shouted.

>"I can't hear the whispers anymore" Kenson said, her eyes glowing blue with the indoctrination of the Reapers.
"Step back" Jane ordered once more. Biotic power glowed from her hands, and she felt, rather than saw Miranda doing the same.

>"All you had to do was stay asleep and none of this would've happened" Kenson moaned.
Biotic power whipped forward as Jane tried desperately to rip the detonator from the deranged scientist's

hands. A press of the thumb was all it took.

BOOM BOOM BOOM!

* * *

><p>Yeah, I know, cliffhanger, sue me. Enjoy it for what it's worth.<p>

10. Chapter 10

I know, I know, I know, people wonder where the hell I've been. Justifiable.

Late November my son was born. I took a break to help my wife handle being a new mother, while working 40 hours a week in my retail job. Christmas shopping sucks when you work retail. Believe me. After that, I was back in class, taking three english classes while still helping with the baby and working. Time to do anything besides work was non-existent. Fast forward to May, I start a new project writing a novella approximately 40,000 words in length.

Quite by accident, a friend read this and made some recommendations. Seeing as I'm still on suspension (week 6, unpaid) I have plenty of time to write. Seeing as my other project is now complete, I have plenty of time for this. But it's going to get a massive makeover. This will make more sense in about two weeks. I promise. Those of you my faithful reviewers and readers have not been forgotten.

End
file.